

Location ecology

Part
one

What can we learn from the coast when it comes to providing a coaching environment that truly welcomes insight?



By Lizzi Larbalestier

For the majority of us who practice NLP our incessant curiosity will probably mean that we have a mix of modalities within our coaching toolkits and a 'distinctly hybrid' approach.

To me coaching is about *enabling others to find insight and solutions to create progressive change*. When we coach we help our clients transcend (often self-imposed) limitations and our role as coaches is to facilitate this with minimal contamination.

Having worked at the coast for the past ten years as a blue health coach I have seen a wave of research give rise to evidence that connecting with our environment enables us to connect more deeply with ourselves. I have developed a relationship with the Cornish coastline whereby the environment is fundamental to the work I do rather than being an afterthought. I am fascinated by the results achieved through exploring landscape metaphor within the littoral zone (the shoreline between land and sea) and a large part of my time is spent connecting with the analogue qualities of the places and spaces I work within.

The term 'ecology' (defined as 'the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings') is used often by NLP professionals and yet it can be easy to underestimate the role that the environment has to play during the coaching process itself.

Take a moment to think about your own practice, maybe reflecting upon your last week of coaching or meetings:

- Who did you coach and where did you coach each of them?
- Beyond convenience, what role did the location play within the coaching?
- How and where did the location add value or perhaps contaminate the experience?
- How much attention was placed upon the time of day, or day of the week that you chose to coach each particular client?
- How and where did your awareness of their subjective lifestyle have an impact on your choice of location and timing?
- How long did you coach each of them for and what factors influenced the duration of their coaching session?

For me, daylight, tide times, the seasons, the weather, flora, fauna and specific terrain all influence client coaching decisions. The fields of environmental psychology, human geography and neuro-conservation offer lessons for us all.

Space

Space is often described as the material components, constructs and boundaries of a location and space really does matter, since the topography we inhabit directly influences and impacts our choice of social interaction.

At the beach we have a coastal landscape with a big sky and horizon – plenty of space and freedom to explore.



The environment is fundamental to the work I do rather than being an afterthought

- The climate is changeable as is the tideline, in continual transition providing direct evidence that nothing is fixed.
- The sand is soft meaning that it is impossible to walk with formality; your body has to loosen up, resulting in a spring in your step to compensate for the moving sand.
- The variable terrain provides a need to pay attention and breathe – engaging all the senses.
- The view is comprised of simplified blocks of colour lacking complexity and relaxing the mind.
- The waves have enough variety to hold a soft fascination rather than requiring a hard focused attention.
- There is a natural soundscape of ocean, wind and seabirds, non-jarring upon the senses and we are already in a state of expanded awareness.

Environmental psychologists have shown that busy cluttered environments can lead to directed attention fatigue. When we step into simplified more open spaces (a park, art gallery or aquarium can work well as an urban substitute for a beach) our attention becomes voluntary, enabling an increase in creative thinking (check out Kaplan and Kaplan's attention restoration theory).

How can you take these ideas into a more built environment? Really question the compatibility of the space that you are working within and the space you are wishing to create within your client. If the location is not optimised, change something – even if it's simply de-cluttering your office!

Place

Connecting with light, shade, texture, colour and form can provoke a deeper questioning and it is here we are likely to move into the domain of place. Whilst place interacts with space, it has a different quality, encompassing the cultural imprints and social and emotional connections we attribute to locations. Place awakens feeling.

At the beach we are conditioned to be lighthearted as for many of us our early childhood experiences will have involved holidays by the sea, exploring, being carefree and risk-tolerant – it is a place for learning and play. It is likely as adults our annual vacation will involve a trip to a coastline, making this a domain which can equally offer restoration, reflection, peace and a punctuation point within a chaotic world.

We associate taking a visit to the beach with positivity and intuitively we sense that it is good for us, whether we put that down to fresh air and activity or to rest and relaxation. Some scholars emphasise access to water as a direct contributing factor within our evolution. Additional research shows that natural spaces unconsciously evoke positive affect (check out Ulrich's stress reduction theory), suggesting that instinctively water (and nature) = survival and so we therefore feel safe near it.

The point is place really does matter and it is deeply worthy of consideration, so ask yourself:

- What are the associations your clients attach to the locations you are working within?
- How comfortable do they (and you) feel to really explore?
- What history do they have within the location you are working?
- How do the place associations within this location help or perhaps contaminate their experience?

If you work in the city consider the locations that are most likely to feel appropriate to coach and be coached in. Particularly question formality and informality if you are seeking to work at a deeper level. Including nature can have stress-reducing qualities and if you are inspired to include water in your coaching approach, urban water such as lakes can provide calm, rivers suggest transition and fountains can offer a sense of privacy. I personally encourage my city clients to use flotation tanks periodically as a helpful mental and emotional reset.

Scale, time and metaphor

Visiting historical landmarks, grand architectural structures or scenic locations can evoke a profound shift in perspective. Museums and planetariums are an urban option for expanding our field of awareness. In fact the potential to experience wonder and amazement is more common than we think – as long as we are open to it, we might hear a street musician and get goosebumps or be mesmerised observing leaves dancing in the wind.

Consider how you might feel having such experiences in comparison to being squashed into a corporate office with no windows. Creative insights flow when we access inspiration and step out of fixed thinking patterns. There is growing scientific evidence that when we experience awe (defined as something so vast it transcends current frames of reference), our resultant feelings of connection directly promote pro-social behaviour (check out UC Berkeley: Keltner). When we shut ourselves away we feel disconnected and can ignore the ripple effect of our actions. It is no surprise that coaching along the coast path watching seals play in the surf provokes truly meaningful insights.

Finding interesting and transitional spaces to work within enables our clients to experience a gentle form of self-inquiry. We can assist them in noticing the qualities of the location in order to explore if and how these reflect their world – their intentions,

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where they place their attention and the actions they find themselves taking.

At the beach we are in a state of 'dynamic equilibrium' which in itself reflects each and every one of our lives; our pace shifts at the coast moment to moment, as does our breath. Even the way we move through the space is variable and the terrain provides so many metaphors and discussion possibilities. A seascape offers perspective – and since we are not bigger, stronger or more beautiful than the Atlantic Ocean, ego retreats and status shifts.

- A sunrise, sunset or even cliff formation can provide a doorway to philosophical discussions about deep time, fostering ability to move forwards and impetus to take action.
- Waves create a rhythm, ebb and flow, encompassing transparency and opacity, qualities that exist in differing proportions as we move through a coaching process.
- Even the scale of marine litter offers evidence of our footprint and a reminder of our ecosystem.

Edges, gradients, abundance, scarcity and many more qualities exist within both the natural and built world if we simply pay attention to the patterns around us.

So... are you being as creative and flexible as you can to ensure the environment becomes your co-facilitator? Where are the metaphors in your terrain? Where can you shift from being habitual to truly inhabiting the spaces and places you work within?

If you coach virtually you might think none of this has relevance and yet even with virtual coaching these considerations are valid – perhaps even more so when bridging geographical distance and time zones. Only last week a US client Zoom-called me from a padded business pod – a soul-less booth with spongy soundproofing. When I directly questioned how the space might work for him, in light of the topic we were exploring, he decided to move... a good call!

The same goes for ourselves when virtual coaching. Use the flexibility of your technology to escape physical confines and bring your most creative self to the table. It's a big bright world – I encourage you to step outside. ●

