

# Inspiring Young People Through Coaching

**A conversation with Robert Stephenson,  
youth coach Head of Youth Coaching  
and Mentoring at the Smart School**

**Nick Bolton**

*Founder - The Smart School*

the  
smart  
school





## **Nick Bolton, Founder**

With a natural passion for developing people, Nick founded the Smart School to create coaches and NLP practitioners who use their skills with joy, conviction and the confidence to make a difference in the world.

All through his business and coaching life, Nick has shown an infectious joy of learning, discovery and development which today makes his Smart School a fantastic place not only to master your skills, but to learn about yourself and become part of a wonderful community.

Nick's commitment to ensuring that everything the school does brings about real results and lasting skills has meant that this unique Youth Training course sets a different standard, fully described inside.

## **Robert Stephenson Head of Dynamic Youth Coaching**

Robert is an actor, teacher, coach and founder member of Unclassified Arts Ltd. With over a decade of being involved in physical theatre arts training and working with young people, he brings a unique creative approach to his coaching work.

As a tutor for WAC Arts and Media College and a regular Visiting Lecturer for Essex University, he ensures that he maintains the very latest understanding and knowledge in his field.

Robert has built a successful career working with young people in many settings. He is passionate about offering young people the space and means to find their own motivation, direction and purpose.



# Introduction

As founder of the Smart School, I am always striving to find new ways to push the boundaries of coaching and related skills. And so I was delighted when I met Robert Stephenson in 2010.

In Robert I had found a passionate youth coach who believed that coaching at its best is a blend of skills, artistry, mentoring and humour. He worked in a wide range of youth settings with different ages, different issues, different challenges and different approaches.

From Pupil Referrals Units to primary schools, from theatres to youth clubs, Robert affected the lives of young people in so many ways.

I knew immediately that a time would come when we would work together to create something extraordinary in youth coaching.

Sometimes though things take a while to come into being and can't be rushed.

Robert was busy running a full time youth coaching and training practice and I was still growing my core business in the Diploma in Coaching Excellence.

But already what was to become Dynamic Youth Coaching had sprung into life in a small way.

We looked at the youth coaching landscape scanning all the way to horizon but couldn't see the kind of programme that we wanted to run. One that combined one-to-one with group work, one that offered a comprehensive approach to the young person's whole life, one that allowed and encouraged the youth coach to use their full range of skills and creativity.

And so now, it is with great pleasure that having created this programme, we can take a moment to reflect on what it is to be a youth coach and hear directly from Robert himself how we inspire, excite, motivate and empower young people.

I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did.

And if you feel inspired to know more then the last page gives details of how you can find out more about the programme to become a Dynamic Youth Coach.

Warmest wishes



Nick Bolton,

Founder, The Smart School



## Key questions

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I'm really delighted to be interviewing Robert Stephenson our very own Head of Youth Coaching and Mentoring here at the Smart School on inspiring, empowering, and developing young people through coaching.

This is particularly interesting to me as the Smart School began a relationship with a youth related charity around one year ago in which some of our student coaches worked with their young apprentices. One of the things that became really clear to me quickly was that the kind of coaching we did where we were bringing adult-oriented coaching to their young apprentices wasn't fully working. And it was only when Robert came on-board and started helping me that I realised how different youth coaching can be from traditional adult person-centred coaching where you rely on the person in front of you to have a much clearer sense of what they're trying to achieve.

So what we're going to be looking at here is how youth coaching differs from traditional youth interventions and from traditional coaching. So by that I mean things like social work, education and other kinds of areas of youth interventions where, in a sense, the professional is the expert. Then I'll be taking a look at how youth coaches work with a mix of different approaches. Again, a lot of coaches work in a very specific way through person-centred work, but youth coaching tends to blend a lot more different approaches. Then we'll take a look at how we help the young person become the expert on their own lives, and what it's like on a day-to-day basis to be a youth coach.

### **What is youth coaching?**

So, Robert, let's start by considering the question: what is youth coaching? Perhaps you can sum it up for us.



Youth coaching, for me, is about having a real dynamic engagement with the young person and asking them the questions they need to hear but, as the adult, being able to guide that young person through that process. Often when you coach an adult, they come to you with some questions or some challenges or some things that they want to talk about. But when you're working with a young person, they don't always know exactly what it is that they want to talk about, and part of the role of the youth coach is to

unpick that and enable them to find out the stuff that they want to explore.

For instance, when you say to an adult, “Okay, so you came to coaching. What’s your challenge or what do you want to achieve?” they can give you some information about that. When you say to a young person, “What’s your challenge or what do you want to achieve?” they’ll often just look at you. Sometimes they’ll just look at you quite blankly!



So what you have to do is have a conversation with them, and in that conversation start to understand who they are, what they’re about, what they’re feeling, and then from that point you can start looking at where you might go with that. Is it about looking at behaviours, is it about looking at their confidence, or is it about looking at a transition that they’re going through?

What was interesting to me was that when we did the work with the youth charity with the young apprentices, if you recall, we struggled to achieve the same outcomes we’d expect with adults in coaching. You weren’t there at the time, but when we were doing it initially, we were struggling to overcome the way young people were thinking about coaching. They were saying, “Well, this feels a bit weird. It’s a bit like counselling.” So it sounds to me like what you’re doing is you’re bringing in a more structured approach. Is that how you think about youth coaching?



That’s right because one of the challenges with youth coaching is that it often starts with an adult, who isn’t a coach, saying to a young person that they’re going to have a coach. And so the young person comes without a clear idea of what it is that this process will bring about. So it’s about creating that engagement and that understanding that you’re here to move them forward in some way, and then find out where the area is that they want to move forward from.

## What are you aiming to achieve as a youth coach?



Okay. Now, I know that as we go through this interview we're going to look in more detail at how you achieve that, but one of the things that's very important, to me and I'm sure to people reading this is: what are you aiming to achieve as a youth coach? What's the end outcome? I don't mean specifically such as to get a job because that's obviously a very specific outcome, but what are you trying to achieve overall as a youth coach?



Possibilities. You're showing young people that there are other possibilities.

With a lot of the young people that I work with, they've often got locked into a certain dynamic. They've got locked into a way of being, whether that's with their peers or with their schools or with their families, and they can't see any other ways out.

Through the coaching I do, they start to see other possibilities, they start to recognise that there's something else that they could be doing and there's something else they could be achieving. So I think it's about bringing those possibilities to light, I suppose; shining that light on the other things that they could be doing or looking at.

When you're coaching a young person you have to know who they are, what their interests are, what they're excited about, what do they do when they're not at school or at university or at college, what were their dreams when they were a kid. You have to get that information because often they don't know that it's okay to talk about that stuff.

So what you're doing is you're creating a space where you say, "You can talk about this. Let's share this information." And one of the ways I go about that is talking about myself and talking about my journey through life and what I've done and some of the things that I failed at and some of the things that I've achieved at. So they kind of go, "Okay, so you were young once and you've had a life."



So that sounds a little bit more like, not so much a role model because they're not trying to be like you, but there's an element in which you use a lot more self-revelation than perhaps a traditional coach would.



Definitely. Although I think as a coach you're not trying to be a role model I think there is a responsibility around saying that there's some good things that you can do and there are positive things you can do and challenging young people if they're talking about things that might be negative or harmful to themselves or to people around them.



Now, we've said some things already, but could you say a bit more on how you think youth coaching differs from traditional coaching. I know you've also trained as a person-centred coach, so what do you view as the major differences here?



I think one of the major differences is that at the beginning, the whole rapport-getting process, is that you're able to lay yourself more open and you're able to have a normal conversation with young people. And when you're doing that you're opening yourself up so they can see that you're real because one of the challenges with young people often is that as a coach you're presented to them. They haven't necessarily asked for you. Somebody's gone and said, "This is a good idea. Come and speak to this person." So you have to get them to feel safe.

And in a way the goals that are identified you identify that with them; they don't have it to start with. So I never say, "What's your goal? What do you want to do?" That question comes from the conversation of, "Who are you? What are you about? What interests you?"

And also there's so much peer pressure and pressure from the media that often the first things they'll talk about is stuff that they think they should be talking about. So there's a lot of the conversations around what I should be doing and what my mates are doing, what my parents think I should do, and you have to see through that and then see the person inside.

### **What issues would you typically work with?**



So you've talked about how you see the person as a whole being, what issues would you be typically working with in practice?



I think it tends to be around confidence and self-esteem. Those are some of the big things that I'm often working with where the young person doesn't feel confident to be who they are and to stand up for what they want. So that's one of the big things. And just that self-esteem, that feeling of, "I'm okay, and the world around me is okay." They tend to feel quite down. And there's always the group dynamic challenge whether that's part of a classroom or part of a youth club, and they're living up to who they think their friends expect them to be, but inside they're going, "I don't really know who I am. I don't really know what's going on."



And I'm presuming, Robert, that you find that that this ripples its way through a number of other areas of their life including how they're coping educationally or maybe within the early days of employment, through the family, through their romantic relationships, their friend relationships, and so on.



Yeah, I think with young people, once you start to get that key where they recognise who they are, then it unlocks all those other doors and they start to go, "Okay, so this is who I am, and this is what I believe in, and this is what I represent. Then at home I can be like this, and I just need to communicate that to my family."



That makes so much sense to me now you've said that because when we started that project and I had my adult-centric coaches going in they weren't getting that I think. And maybe that's where we struggled at first. They were bringing an adult-centric view of coaching to young people and going with, "Well, what specifically do you want to achieve from this coaching? What is your outcome?" etc. So it's really interesting you've said it's about the young person's identity rather than specific actions and goals.



Yeah, I think so. Sometimes I'll have a session with a young person and we won't have any goals laid out. It will just be a conversation around who they are and how they feel about themselves. And that will be it. That will be the session. And the next sessions— I know I might be jumping ahead here, but I know one of the biggest challenges that often happens with youth coaching is people think you can just complete it in a session. You can just go in, sort them out in one session, and move on. But of course, you need time to build that relationship and to open it up and to really understand who they are before you can start creating changes with them.

## What kinds of young people do you work with?



OK, let's move on to explore the kinds of young people that you work with because, of course, when we say youth coaching, it's such a broad term. Are we talking about 8-year-olds? Are we talking about 21-year-olds? Who would you typically work with?



I suppose I work with a wide spectrum and some of that's because of my background. So some of the work that I did, I spent a couple of years working with the London Bubble Theatre Company developing a programme for Reception and Year 1 children around storytelling. So I will work with quite young children, and that won't be necessarily looking at goals and what they want to achieve in life, that's more about their own wellbeing and group dynamics. But definitely from 8-year-olds upwards I will work with.

I also go into youth clubs to work. That can be fun and colourful and challenging, but it can also be where you have some really big changes. One of the projects I've just finished working on is a centre where young people have been removed from school - it's sort of their last port of call to get an education and some qualifications.

I was doing some work with a group, and they go in and out, they wander around, you're constantly having that conversation about whether it's appropriate to be on their phones and so on. And I had this half an hour conversation with this girl about a play that she had been reading. We just talked about the character in this play, and I could see that she was asking questions and discovering stuff about herself by looking at this character.

And so there's some really interesting ways that you can get in and work with young people in those rather challenging environments because one of the things about a challenging environment is that because the young people don't want to lay themselves open or bare to the rest of the group, so you have to find ways that enables them to ask those questions without it sounding like they're asking the questions.



Okay. So you're working with a wide range of ages and presumably a wide range of responses to you as well. How do you manage your own personal state within all of that?



Well, one of the things for me is I have to have my own coach, I have to have my own space where I go and unpick what's going on for me, and I do lots of anchoring. But also I think being really honest with the people that I'm working with. So if they're saying stuff that I find offensive, not to laugh it off and be positive about it, but to say, "I think that's just rude and offensive. Where does that come from?" And to have those honest, open conversations so they see that you're human. In some of the centres you work at, people try to mask that humanness and just try to get the work done. I just think it's important to allow them to have that personal connection with you.



Out of interest Robert, what would you coach a person as young as eight on?



Well one of the projects that I do is around transitions where young people are moving from primary to secondary or moving from one school to another school when they're leaving the area. And you would coach them around how are they going to manage that change, what are the things they're finding challenging, how are they going to make new friends, how are they going to manage their own emotions. So you will coach them around those sorts of areas. But it's not traditional coaching in that sense. It's more about facilitating a space for them to go inside really.



I'm a big believer in what I do as a coach is create a space that is safe for a young person to have communication and to share their ideas and their thoughts. And sometimes that space with an individual and sometimes it's with a much larger group.



We've already covered some of the ways you coach, but is there anything that you want to add about that which we haven't already covered there?

I suppose the other thing is that I use lots and lots of stories within the work that I do. I've got my Dream Tree metaphor that I use when coaching groups that allows a whole group to have that coaching journey but have their own individual viewpoint on that journey.

## What is a typical day in your life as a youth coach?



So what is a day in the life of Robert Stephenson like as a youth coach? Perhaps you could just talk us through what a day might be.



Okay, well there's certainly no typical day; it's really varied. So my Mondays, at the moment, I'm working in a primary school. I have a morning session with the head teacher where I coach her around her vision for the school. And then I have a coaching session with the leadership team where we look at how they're going to take the head's vision and how they see it and place that into their own teaching. And then I coach the young people in the classrooms looking at how they think school could be engaging and more exciting. So I'm doing a whole school in a day. I spend the whole day there working.

So that's sort of what a Monday might look like, but then a different day of the week I might go to a Pupil Referral Unit and do a coaching session there using some drama skills to get the young people to explore ideas without them having to own the ideas themselves because they're playing those ideas through characters.

And then I might do a youth club where I'll be there and whoever wants to have a chat with me will come along and talk about whatever it is that they want to talk about. And sometimes I'll have specific events at a youth club where we might talk about interviews or personal relationships, and people will drop in and we'll have conversations around that.



Okay, so it's very varied in terms of not just what you do, but also the environments you're in.



What's lovely about it is that often when I work in spaces people kind of say, "You do this differently to other people that we've had in. The young people go and they talk to somebody, but they don't get that outcome. Or they don't have those conversations. Or somebody comes in and does drama with them, and that troubled child doesn't get involved. How are you able to do that?" And I say to them, "Well, it's because it's not just coaching or therapy or drama or creativity – it's a mixture of all of those things

coming together with an aim to enable that young person to unlock themselves or see themselves as a real person.”

### **How would others kinds of youth professionals benefit from these coaching skills?**



OK, so there are really clear benefits to the way you work. How would a social worker benefit from being a youth coach or bringing that skill in? How would a teacher benefit? How would a professional use youth coaching to enhance what they already do?



I think part of it is about the style of the questions that they ask. I think it's partly about the idea of creating the safe psychological environment. I think that teachers and social workers work very hard on creating a safe space for young people. There's something about when you're using coaching questions to create that safe space that enhances it. And I think there's something about being creative with what you do. So I don't do the same things all the time; I'm always mixing it up to see what's working. And within a coaching session with a group, you have the space and the freedom to do that.



So it's about enhancing their existing professional skills by building on more empowering approaches to young people. It's a missing piece if you like?



Yeah. And also one of the big things that I find when I work with teachers is they can often be afraid to ask the class a question that the teacher doesn't already know the answer to. So one of the things I do when I'm working with teachers is a lot of confidence work around being able to open up that space without knowing what the answers are. Usually as a teacher you're imparting knowledge that you know, and when you're coaching you don't know what the answers are going to be, and you're improvising and being creative around what's coming up.

## What is challenging about what you do and what's rewarding?



It sounds like a great place to be Robert but I wonder if it's always so rewarding? What is challenging for you in the work you do? What's the tough stuff?



The hardest thing is when you're working with somebody, and you can see that they're getting close to breaking through, but the school doesn't have the time or the space to allow you to do that work with them. That's what I find really challenging, when you're going, "This person needs a couple more sessions and they'll start to engage and they'll start to be part of something." And the school are going, "Yeah, but they're moving on or we're moving on to something else."

The other tough thing is you can't control the world outside. So with some of the boys I've been working with, you turn up for the session, and somebody says, "Oh, no, they're not going to be here because they got arrested last night," or "They've been in a fight," or "We haven't seen them for a week." And you're kind of going, "Ugh, how do I reach this person?" and just managing yourself, and going, "Well, I can't control all of that stuff."



OK, and what is it that makes you say, "Oh, I'm so glad I do this."? What's the rewarding stuff?



It's when they change. It's when a young person says to you, "Oh, so I can do this and I can do that?" and you go, "Well, yeah. Of course you can if you want to." I was working with a group today in fact, and one of the boys said to me, "So I'm either going to do this or I'm going to do that." And I said to him, "So that's really interesting. Could you do both?" And he sort of looked at me and looked at what he'd written and said, "Oh, yeah! I could" with a big smile!

Those are the moments when it feels great to be working with young people, when you see them have those breakthroughs. Or you see somebody who was really nervous about going to a job interview, and you spent some time working with them about their body language and how they might behave, and then you hear that they got that job and the employer's really happy with their

attitude. All of that sort of stuff is what makes you go, “Yeah, this is worth it. This is why I do it.”



It occurs to me that youth coaching is about inspiring tomorrow's adults today, and I wonder whether you have a sense of not just the individuals you impact on, but the sense of the bigger impact you have. Is that something you feel, or is it very much more of a micro level?



I think it's on a bigger level. I suppose it happens in both ways because you go in, and you work with individuals, and you see their changes, and then sometimes you work with a group, a class. And when you see changes in the individuals in the class, you see the class start to change, and then you recognise if that's happening then you know that the school will start to change. So I'm aware that it has a ripple effect, it has a knock-on effect. So you know that you're creating something bigger than just the change in that one person, but you don't always see what that outcome is.

When you work with families sometimes you get a greater sense of that change. I did some work with a parent who had a son who was just disengaged with school, didn't want to get up, didn't want to go in, and was just kind of bringing everybody down. And we just had some conversations about what was going on at school and what he might get out of being there and what were the fun bits, and he started to engage in school more. There was a relaxation, a release, from the tension that family had been holding. And so as a family you could see that they were getting on better.

## What specific skills should a youth coach have?



Nice. So you really get a real sense of the impact across the board. So what specific skills should someone have or be willing to gain in order to be a great youth coach?



I think you need patience. I think you need to have a really strong sense of self. You need to be able to sit in a room with a group of young people and allow them to express themselves without feeling that they are attacking you. And have the patience to let that happen before you begin the heavy, meaty work.

I think you need a real curiosity. I think all coaches have curiosity, that curiosity to go, “Well, what makes this young person tick? What’s going on for them? What excites them? What are they afraid of? What do they want to achieve?” – a real sense of that.

You need to be creative or have a desire to be creative so you can blend your approaches and your ideas and come at it from different angles. I think that’s definitely a quality that’s needed with youth coaching.

I think you need to be energetic, not necessarily bouncing off the walls all the time, but energetic and positive and always seeing the positive in what’s being brought to you and finding ways to use it even if they’re swearing and throwing chairs at you, finding ways to use that to bring it round back into the session.



There seems to be one really core quality as well which is this idea that you’re always collaborating. You might work with a young person, but you’re not the authority.



Yeah, absolutely. I think it’s always a dialogue. You’re always throwing questions around with the young person and then they’re throwing it back at you, and you’re saying, “I don’t know all the answers, but let’s explore this. Let’s see what might work and give those things a go.” But recognising that it’s the young person’s world. They know what’s going on in their own world, and they know the things that they can take from a session and apply.

One of the exercises I do is this thing called Versions where we look at which version of yourself do you need to have in any

particular situation. You're still you, but you might be a slightly different you in a different environment. Because the young people they know that they can't leave a session, go back into the youth club, and say to their friends, "Well, yeah, Robert and I talked about meditation. I'm going to go meditate for a while," because their friends are just going to laugh at them. So you have to work with them and go, "Okay, so what can you do? How is this going to work for you? Is there a space that you need separately from your friends to go and look at that or from the classroom to go and look at that? How do you find the support within your world to make the changes that you want to make?"

### **How did you get started as a youth coach?**

How did you go about creating a youth coaching practice?



It was taking the drama workshops that I was already delivering, taking those into schools, and then sort of at the end of those doing mini-coaching sessions, and saying to people, "This is something else I can offer." And then it was also going into schools that I had rapport with and saying, "I've got these tools and these skills. Would they be of use to you?"



I also work with organisations that work in theatres, and say, "Okay, here's a skill. It creates this. Here are some outcomes that you get from it. Why don't you use it?" And I think, especially with schools, you kind of have to give them a little bit of it so they can see how it works and the flavour of it, and once they start to get that, then they become more excited and interested in hiring you as a youth coach.



Interesting. What you're saying is that you actually proved your case before you expected them to buy into you.



Yes. And with some teachers it's just about coaching that teacher through something because a lot of teachers are stressed, they have work/life balance issues, and if you just run a really quick bit of coaching around that, and say, "Right, I've unpicked that for you. Can you imagine if your class was really engaged, what that would do for you as well?" And they go, "Oh, okay. Yeah, I can see that."



And how did you expand into things like youth clubs?  
What was your approach to get into that?



I suppose one of the things is I talk to everybody about what I do. Whenever I meet people and they say, "What do you do?" I talk about the people that I work with and the outcomes I create. So I'm constantly talking to people. I meet people who work in youth clubs or work with young people all the time, and they then invite you in to come and have a chat with the young people to see if that's something that might work.



And where are you meeting those guys? Are you networking?  
What's the process?



Sometimes it's networking. Mainly events where schools or youth organisations are going to go to, you want to have a feel of what that is and what's going on. With Twitter and Facebook and LinkedIn now you can also get right in there. And also reading lots of blogs. You often find classes will run a project and they'll keep a blog of that project, and so you get involved in their blog, you have a chat with them about what they're doing, you offer them some questions and some tips about how they might try something, and then after you've made that connection, you've built a relationship, then you offer your services as well.



### **What advice would you give somebody about becoming a youth coach?**

Great! One last question for you, what advice would you give somebody about becoming a youth coach?



I suppose I would say to somebody if you're interested in being somebody who enables young people to be awesome and create wonderful lives for themselves, if you've got an inkling of that then you want to start reading about life coaching, have a look online, there are various videos out there on YouTube about some of the processes that people use, and just start talking to young people and seeing is to if something that gives you that thrill and that excitement and makes you feel like you're putting something back into the world.



Interesting. Okay, so for you it's really about the passion you have rather than any practicalities. It's really just, "What does this stuff mean to me?"



Yeah, there's practical stuff like: Are you going to work from an office? Are you going to work in schools? Are you going to invite people to your space? Are you going to go out? Are you just going to work in your local area? It's great if you have lots of schools in your local area and you can really tap into and be the person that those schools turn to. For me, that's a really good way of working.

I tend to be rather broader but that comes from the other work that I do which sends me all around London, so I don't have a specific area that I work in. But if you're the person in your local area, that's I think a really good thing for you to start working on. If you're a parent or if you know parents and families – that's a great place to start.



Brilliant, Robert. Thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure talking to you about this and I look forward to working with you to create our fabulous youth coaches who follow in your footsteps.



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