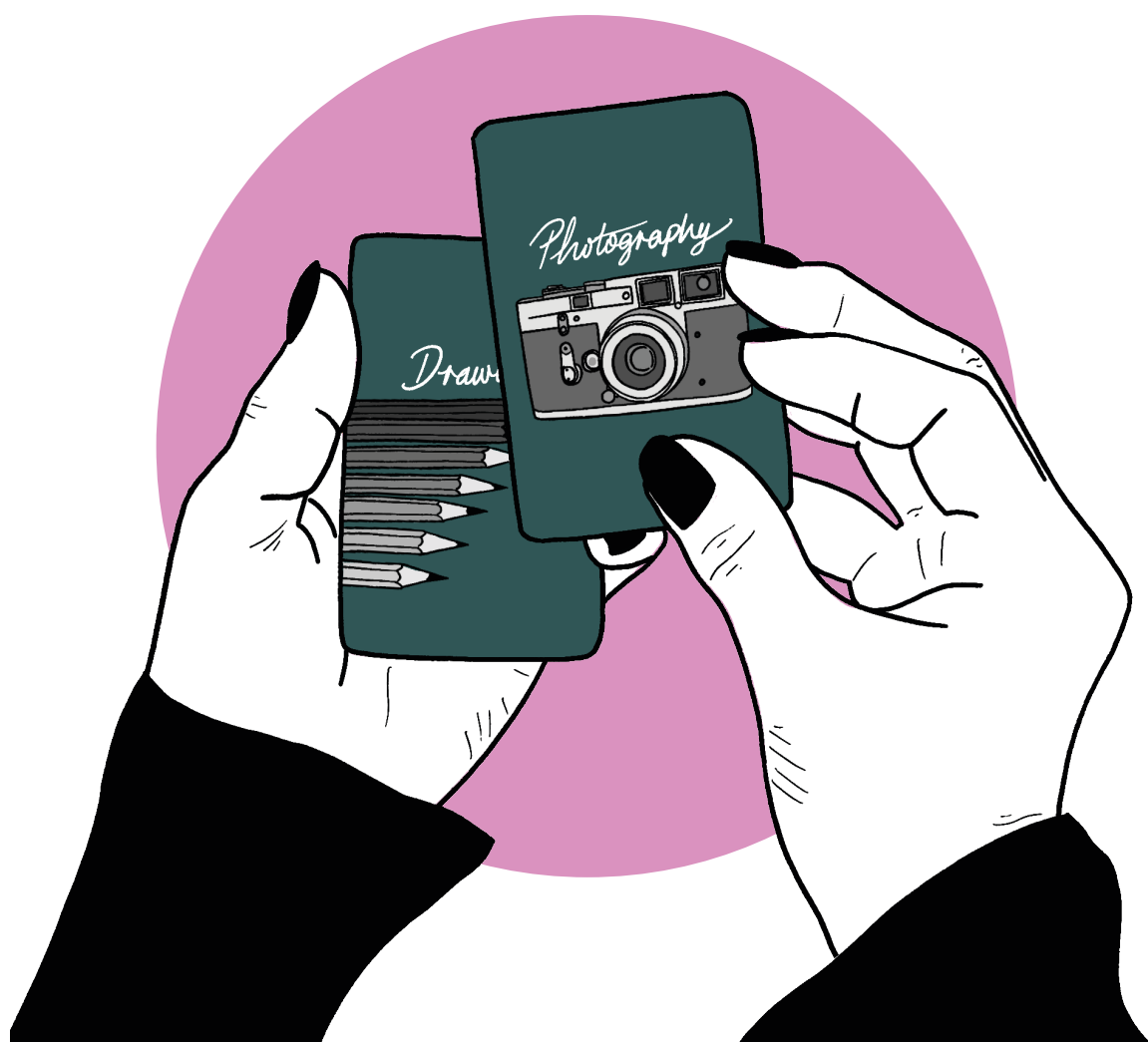


# PLAYING IT SAFE

An Illustrated Guide to Ethical Practice in  
Coaching with Creativity



*Sally Waters & Beth Clare McManus*



### *A thank you to our contributors*

We knew from the start that this guide would be so much richer and more useful if it included more than just our own perspectives. So we asked four experienced and trusted coaches to share their thoughts around the ethics of creativity in coaching, and their advice to coaches who might be thinking of experimenting with creative techniques in their practice for the first time. We owe a debt of gratitude to our contributors who gave their time and wisdom so generously, and only hope to do their insights justice in this short piece:

**Andréa Watts**, *arts-based creative coach, trainer, speaker and author. The first specialist in coaching with collage.*

**Dr Andrea Giraldez-Hayes**, *coaching psychologist, psychotherapist, and BPS registered supervisor.*

**Auriel Majumdar**, *creative coach, supervisor, consultant and educator.*

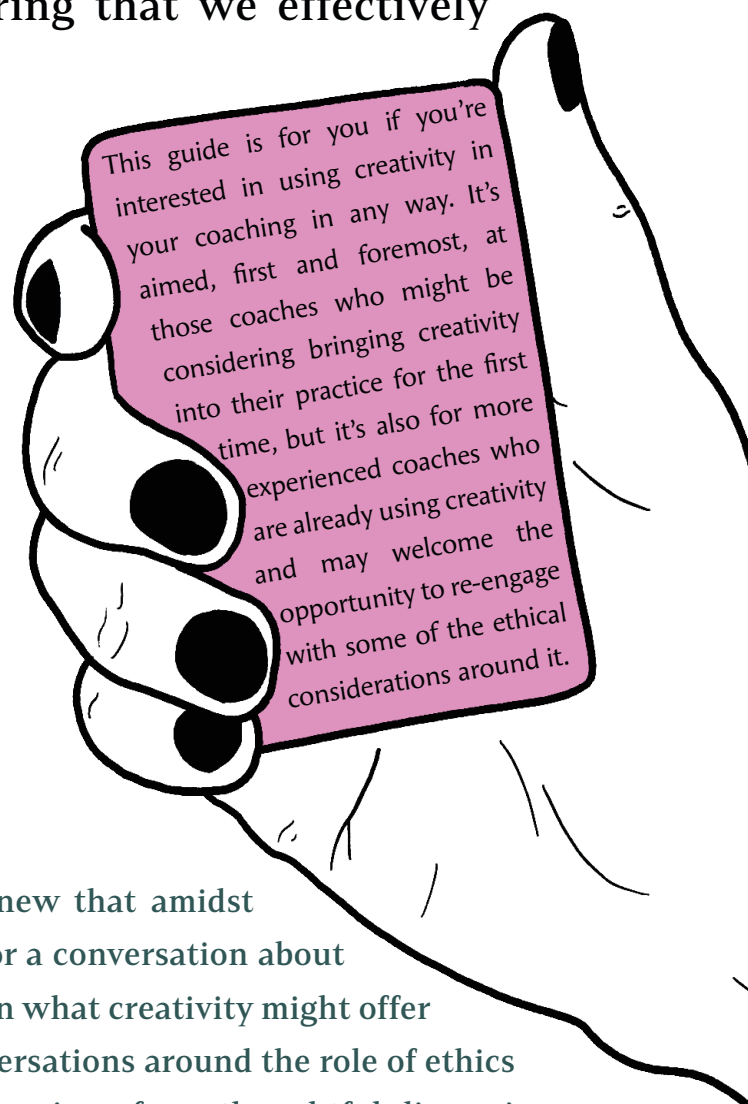
**Stephen Brown**, *professional coach, coach educator, facilitator and consultant who takes an improvisational approach to creativity in coaching.*

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hilst creativity in coaching can feel like an exciting space and, on the surface, might feel like a fun or playful addition to our coaching practice, there is also room for caution. Creative techniques can give clients the potential to access information that might be beyond their current awareness. This can be powerful and insightful, but it could also be deeply challenging and even possibly unsafe if the client (or indeed coach) isn't ready for what emerges. Making sure we as coaches are prepared as far as possible for what might happen when we choose to bring creativity into our practice is key to safer practice, as is ensuring that we effectively prepare our clients.

There seems to be a rise in coaches interested in using creativity in their practice, and the reasons for this are as numerous as there are coaching styles. Some coaches might be creatives who want to incorporate their preferred medium into their coaching practice; others may be drawn to creativity because they're exploring their own, perhaps latent or formerly blocked, creativity. Others still may have experienced the power of creative techniques in coaching for themselves, in practice spaces or as a client, and may be keen to explore its role in their own practice.

With the increasing interest in this area, we knew that amidst the tools and techniques there had to be space for a conversation about ethics. In our work as coaches we are interested in what creativity might offer to our practice, and we have been exploring conversations around the role of ethics in coaching with creativity. This guide is an extension of our thoughtful discussions - two coaches with a desire to safely integrate and experiment with creativity in our client work. It is written as a collection of our thoughts, alongside the reflections of a number of contributors - put together in a (hopefully) accessible and practical way. Our aim is not to provide a 'how to' or to propose a set of rules to follow, but to share some things to consider which might spark your own reflections in relation to ethical practice when working with creativity in coaching.



## A note on terminology:

### *What do we mean when we say 'creativity' in coaching?*

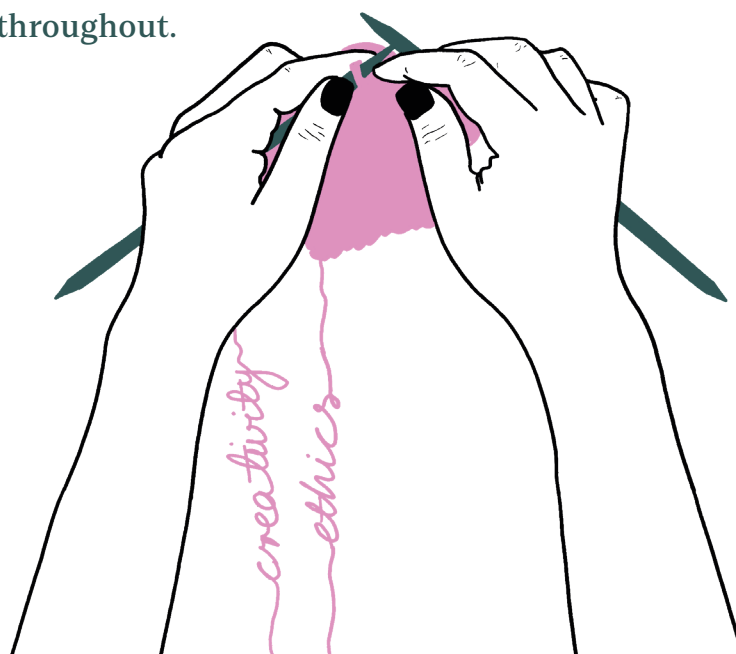
As we see it, there are potentially two ways to interpret creativity in coaching. The first is the use of a *creative technique*, either within a coaching session or within your coaching practice as a whole. Examples include visual arts-based tools such as collaging, drawing or photography, the use of music, drama, or literary based techniques including using poetry, somatic practices and humour and improvisation.

The second way of looking at creativity in coaching is that *creativity is a lens through which we view our coaching practice as a whole*. As Auriel Majumdar put it, "I take a creative stance in my coaching. It's about bringing something new into being - it's existential meaning-making.". Thought of in this way, creativity isn't something that we *do*, but is a belief about coaching that guides how we are as a coach.

We don't see these definitions as value-laden; one way is not fundamentally 'better' than the other, nor do we see them as fully distinct from each other. But outlining them does provide a useful framework for having a conversation about the ethics of creativity in coaching. In this piece, we focus primarily on the application of creative techniques in coaching.

### *What do we mean when we say 'ethics' in coaching?*

We think of coaching ethics as an ongoing practice of reflexivity and reflective practice, rather than a destination we will ever reach; indeed, we have found that our ethical reflections have only increased the longer we have been practicing. And while coaching ethics is often presented as moments of choice, we also see it more generally as critically engaging with all our actions and behaviours as a coach, on an ongoing basis and not just at certain times. Coaching ethics could therefore encompass decisions about who we coach, how we charge for our services, what we promise our clients, and how we start and end coaching engagements, as well as those moments of choice such as conflicts of interest and disclosures. It also includes how we think about the kind of tools and techniques we bring into our coaching sessions - how we make decisions about what to use or not use, and how we work with clients to ensure their safety throughout.



## Things to Consider:

We've framed our thoughts and those of our contributors as a series of questions designed to aid reflection on ethics in relation to creativity in coaching. Our aim is not to define rules but share the types of enquiries that have come to light as we considered this topic, and through our conversations with our contributors. While we share some ideas in response to the questions, we have not tried to provide the 'answers', which will be personal to the individual coach and their practice. These reflective questions encompass both 'smaller', detail-orientated things to think about, like the duration of a creative coaching session, and 'bigger' considerations like how creativity fits into our philosophy as a coach. In our experience, both ends of the spectrum provide fertile ground for ethical reflection.



### *Why do I want to use this creative technique?*

Before we bring a creative technique into our practice, it can be useful to consider why we want to do so. Dr Andrea Giraldez-Hayes noted that newer coaches are often drawn to creative approaches because they feel “attractive and different”. And it’s through experimenting with these tools and techniques on themselves or in peer spaces that new coaches often notice the impact on themselves first - “it connects and opens them to emotions they haven’t had before”, leading them to want to introduce creativity into client sessions.

However, bringing in a technique for our own reasons may not sit in service of the client’s agenda and it’s worth reflecting on whether we’re using this technique for the client or whether it is really for ourselves. As Auriel Majumdar pointed out, with an increased interest in creativity in coaching, it can be easy to forget the client. Stephen Brown puts it this way, “Creativity is how I’ve learned to process my world and it’s tempting to think that others will respond in the same way”, but that “assuming that everyone will feel the same way would be to impose my agenda on others”.

## *How am I contracting with my client for the use of creativity?*

Creativity offers clients the potential to tap into ideas and insights that may sit outside of their current awareness, and that they have not been able to express verbally. And while this may be a positive experience for some, Dr Andrea Giraldez-Hayes points out that our unconscious can also hide things from us, potentially leading to unexpected realisations and a greater level of discomfort than the client may wish to sit with in the coaching space. Andréa Watts reminds us that creativity in coaching can lead to “deep work”, work that requires additional consideration and preparation for both coach and client.

Contracting doesn't just happen at the start of a coaching engagement; it's an 'alive' process that continues throughout. So when we think about contracting, we can consider how we are preparing the client both up front and in the moment. How can we create the conditions for us to use a creative technique if that's what feels appropriate? How can we then re-contract in the moment or ahead of a session around the use of a specific technique?

The idea of 'informed consent' can be challenging if we take an emergent approach to using creativity in our practice, that is, if we make a decision in the moment about whether to bring in a particular technique (or not) based on when it 'feels right' to do so. Stephen Brown suggests contracting up front to allow for this emergence, saying to clients that “things might get a little playful”.

Then in the moment, we can re-contract for the use of a particular creative technique. Things to consider here are giving the client full autonomy over whether they want to use the technique or not, preparing the client for the “deep work”, as Andréa Watts puts it, that can result from using creativity, and discussing what will happen after the session. This requires us as coaches to have thought through and planned the 'before, during and after' of using a creative technique.

Something else to consider is the client's own relationship with creativity. Many people have had an experience of feeling that they aren't creative, or “can't do” creativity. Therefore, if they try out a creative technique and ultimately it doesn't suit them or have the desired outcome, that can add to that narrative; a client might feel that they are somehow at fault. Auriel Majumdar suggests explaining to our client that we're going to try something out but that it may not suit their preferences, in which case we'll move on to something else. This can go some way to guarding against a client feeling that they're “no good” at a particular type of creativity, or creativity in general.



### ***How am I preparing my client?***

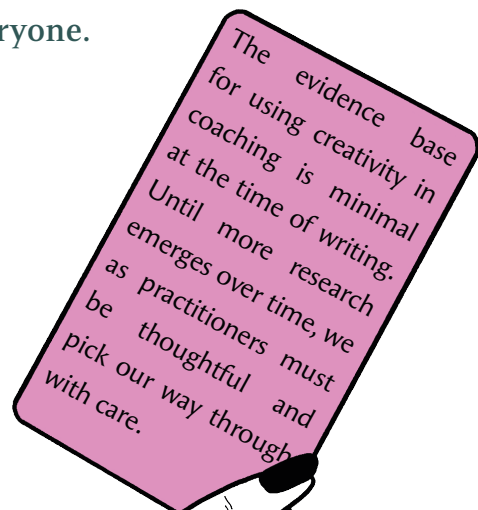
If the reality is that we can't know precisely what will happen when we work with creativity in coaching, how are we preparing ourselves, and our clients, for this type of work? This is about planning not for what we *think* will happen, but for what *could* happen.

This planning can begin at the start of a coaching engagement, with a conversation about how the client resources themselves and what they will do to look after themselves if they have a particularly challenging coaching session. Building in some extra time after the coaching session can be helpful too, which can be used for the coach and client to talk about what has happened in the session and develop a plan of action if required. Andréa Watts cautions against not spending enough time on an exercise and recommends talking to clients up front about an elongated session, encouraging them to block out some time afterwards to process anything that has come up. She recommends adding at least 30 minutes of 'debrief' time after the coaching work, which can be used for both coach and client to discuss the session, or for the client to reflect by themselves. Whilst you may not need to use the time, it's important to have it planned in and available.

### ***How am I preparing myself?***

Preparing ourselves for the potential that the client may uncover something new and possibly challenging is also key. As Andrea Giraldez-Hayes says "clients are not experiments", and her advice to coaches interested in starting to use a creative tool or technique is to get some additional training and support in that particular area.

Experiencing tools yourself is a huge advantage, as Andréa Watts makes clear: "As a coach, you should experience a particular tool or technique yourself before introducing it to a client.". But we also need to recognise - and be prepared - that everybody will have a different, and potentially unpredictable, reaction to something. And while you yourself may have had an enjoyable, useful or even profound experience using a particular tool, that doesn't mean it will be the same for everyone.

A hand holding a pink rectangular card with white text. The card is tilted slightly to the right. The text on the card reads: "The evidence base for using creativity in coaching is minimal at the time of writing. Until more research emerges over time, we as practitioners must be thoughtful and pick our way through with care." The hand is a simple line drawing with black outlines and white interiors.

The evidence base for using creativity in coaching is minimal at the time of writing. Until more research emerges over time, we as practitioners must be thoughtful and pick our way through with care.

## *How can I make the most of supervision?*

All our contributors spoke about the importance of supervision, and ideally choosing a supervisor who is experienced with, or at least interested in, creative tools and techniques; it's helpful, as Stephen Brown says, to have a supervisor who really “gets it”. This may mean engaging more than one supervisor.

Supervision, as Andréa Watts said, helps us understand our limits, our competence and our experience. It might be through supervision that we can explore reflective questions, such as the ones we have shared in this guide, before bringing creativity to our clients.



## *What is my relationship with coaching ethics?*

Coaching ethics can be complex and nuanced - Auriel Majumdar put it, it's “layered”. And, in our experience, while some coaches deliberately and regularly engage with the questions and challenges that arise from thinking about coaching ethics, for others it's an uncomfortable process. For other coaches, ethics may have been a prominent part of their coach training or early work but, in the busyness of day-to-day life, may become less of a preoccupation over time. Sometimes, worrying that we might have done something ‘wrong’ can keep coaches from engaging with ethical considerations in the here and now.

Taking a moment to reflect on how we feel about coaching ethics generally can help to shine a light on how we currently engage with ethics and perhaps identify areas for further work, whether that's in our own reflective practice or with our supervisor. A suggestion from Auriel Majumdar is to think of coaching ethics as being equivalent to having pride in our work, and therefore being motivated to pay attention to our practice so that it's the best it can be. We would add that it's important to remember that there are no easy answers to ethical questions. This is a complex, philosophical area of professional practice and the multitude of perspectives available that can help us to engage with the subject with an open mind and without feeling shamed - by ourselves or anyone else - can be contradictory.



## How does using creativity in coaching tie into my philosophy as a coach?

This is potentially a big question, especially if you're a new coach; the idea of having our own 'coaching philosophy' - knowing and understanding our own beliefs about coaching and what the purpose of our coaching is - is a reflective process that may develop over many years, and continue to evolve over the course of your professional life. But having an idea of our coaching philosophy can give any creative technique we may use a solid grounding and, as Auriel Majumdar said, "increase how congruent it feels for the client". Similarly, Stephen Brown reflected that: "developing your own philosophy and drawing from the different models out there will probably serve your clients better". In this way, we can consider any tool or technique that we include in our practice as part of a bigger whole. We're

being, as Auriel Majumdar puts it "philosophy-led rather than tool-led".



### Further Reading

- Bachkirova, T. (2016). The Self of the Coach: Conceptualization, Issues and Opportunities for Practitioner Development. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68(2), 143-156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000055>
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- Biquet, M. (2021/2). *Ethical Dilemmas in Coaching Today*. EMCC Global.
- Smith, W.-A., Passmore, J., Turner, E., Lai, Y.-L., & Clutterbuck, D. (Eds.), (2023) *The Ethical Coaches' Handbook: A Guide to Developing Ethical Maturity in Practice*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/978100327729>
- Smith, W.-A., Pontes, E.H., Magadlela, D., & Clutterbuck, D. (Eds.). (2023). *Ethical Case Studies for Coach Development and Practice: A Coach's Companion*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/b23351>

Thank you for engaging with our words.

We offer this collection of thoughts, illustrations and reflective prompts as a gentle and supportive pause for thought about the ways in which you might incorporate creativity into your professional practice - whether for the first time or as an evolution of your existing explorations. We would welcome and encourage more conversations about the topic of ethics in coaching with creativity and hope that this short guide might inspire you to bring this conversation to life through your practice with peers and with clients.



**Sally Waters** is a coach with an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology. Her work centres on the idea of creating space to hear ourselves think and she is interested in exploring the ways in which creativity can help us do that. Sally is an EMCC accredited coach at Practitioner level.

**Beth Clare McManus** is a psychologist, artist and researcher. Her best work happens at the intersection of psychology, coaching and creativity. Beth is a PhD student exploring the role of arts-based supervision approaches in coach development and identity, and is interested in the potential for creativity to support our capacity to reflect. She is an EMCC accredited coach/mentor at Senior Practitioner level and works with compassionate and creative coaches in her practice as a coach supervisor.

