
INSTITUTE for LEARNING

May 9, 2017

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Institute for Learning Releases “Content-Focused Coaching for Continuous Improvement in Literacy and Mathematics”

PITTSBURGH—A teacher described the change in her students after she began to participate in Content-Focused Coaching® (CFC), a model of job-embedded professional learning developed by the Institute for Learning (IFL). “They’re challenging each other,” she said. “Well, I don’t agree with you. Well, why? Beforehand, I had some very angry little boys and little girls in my classroom. I have a boy that started the school year by flipping his desk.... And now he is engaged in these lessons and his hand is raised.... They’re challenged in a way that they haven’t been challenged before.”

Content-Focused Coaching has been shown to improve instruction and increase student achievement, according to “Content-Focused Coaching for Continuous Improvement in Literacy and Mathematics,” a report just released by the University of Pittsburgh. An online version of CFC, recently developed by researchers at Pitt, is also proving to be effective at raising the level of instruction in a range of schools. The online model is flexible, affordable, and available to individual teachers from any location, making it especially promising for small and rural schools. The IFL is now expanding both face-to-face and online CFC to the middle and high school levels and to other content areas in schools nationwide.

A unique form of coaching, CFC differs from traditional coaching in a number of ways, as the report details. First, the CFC model incorporates a stance toward teaching that helps teachers raise their expectations for students as well as for themselves. For example, CFC promotes the idea that students become smarter through sustained and directed effort, and treats student discussion as fundamental to learning.

Second, CFC focuses on actual classroom practice. Working with the coach, teachers go through a cycle of designing a lesson, teaching the lesson, analyzing the results, and deciding what should be revised. Like athletes and surgeons who study their own performances with a view toward improvement, CFC teachers examine their own and others’ practice to continually hone their.

Third, as its name suggests, CFC is centered on meaningful content. CFC coaches are not brought in to “fix” learning gaps that were identified by the last

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achievement test. Rather, coaches help teachers link content knowledge to pedagogy and research on learning to meet students' ongoing learning needs.

Finally, CFC does not attempt to "fix" teachers. Studies have shown that when teachers who "need help" are assigned to work with a coach, the coach/teacher relationship can be flawed from the start. CFC coaches work with all teachers in a grade or grade span, emphasizing that all teachers are learners.

"Professional development I've participated in seems like it just scratches the surface on important strategies or techniques," said a teacher who participated in CFC online. "This workshop allowed us to really participate and apply what we were learning, such as a college course would instead of the professional development I've taken since leaving the university. The rigor was at a higher level than in-person workshops and there were many aspects which added to the rigor—reading articles, watching the videos, applying and receiving feedback."

Along with a description of the key features and outcomes of CFC, the report discusses virtual CFC, the IFL's collaboration with the state of Tennessee to scale up the model across a state, and the kind of support for CFC implementation the IFL provides schools and districts. Authored by Fellows of the IFL, the report is available at ifl.pitt.edu.

For more than 20 years, the Institute for Learning has supported the improvement of education and achievement of all students, especially those traditionally underserved. Through decades of research, IFL Fellows have come to understand what it takes for all students to become effective, enthusiastic, and independent learners, and for educators at every level to inspire, foster, and sustain high levels of achievement in their students. Today the IFL provides educators with resources designed to work together to support both teaching and learning in the classroom across all content areas.

Content-Focused Coaching is a registered trademark of the University of Pittsburgh.

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