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BY STEPHANIE HRISH

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February 2015 | Vol. 36 No. 1
COORDINATES Routines Support Learning for Everyone — Including Coaches

By Donna DiPrima Bickel, Tabetha Bernstein-Davis, and Lindsay Clare Matsumura

Learning how to give effective feedback can be a difficult task for teacher leaders. This is especially true for what is called “hard feedback”—that is, feedback that challenges the teacher’s practice and therefore may cause some level of professional discomfort.

Educators in the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for Learning have developed a coaching model that eliminates the need for hard feedback. This coaching model, called content-focused coaching, sets clear expectations about outcomes for applying new pedagogical practices in the classroom, uses routines that support everyone (including the coach) as learners, and relies on cognitive tools to guide conversation and provide substantive feedback. The institute has found that content-focused coaching allows coaches to be effective without resorting to hard feedback.

And the proof is in the results: A four-year (2006-10) Institute of Education Sciences randomized control trial that tested the effectiveness of content-focused coaching showed an increase in effective literacy instruction and student achievement (Matsumura, Gurnier, & Spybrook, 2013). Findings demonstrated that:

• 4th- and 5th-grade students in Title I schools performed better on the state achievement test than similar students in the comparison schools.

• Teachers scored higher on classroom observation measures related to the rigor and interactivity of the discussions than did teachers in the comparison schools.

• Teachers reported more intensity and variety of in-class assistance from literacy coaches than teachers in the comparison schools.

WHAT IS CONTENT-FOCUSED COACHING?

Content-focused coaching is practice-based professional learning implemented at district, school, and classroom levels. Created by the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, the program was originally used in mathematics and later adapted for use in literacy instruction.

To date, content-focused coaching has been implemented by school districts and early childhood education programs in cities across the country, including Los Angeles, California; New York; New York; Denver, Colorado; Providence, Rhode Island; Austin and El Paso, Texas; Guilford, Connecticut; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

At the district level, the institute provides intensive professional learning to literacy coaches to ensure they have a high level of pedagogical expertise and ability to work effectively with teachers. District leaders and principals also participate to create a shared vision of effective teaching and to support coaches’ work with teachers.

At the school level, literacy coaches use what they learn to work with teachers in professional learning groups and individually in their classrooms.

The institute works in districts to assist current coaches and help hire new ones. A practice-based hiring kit (McCarthy, Bickel, & Arre, 2010) educates district leaders in how to clearly define the coach’s role, form criteria for selecting coaches, and create an application and hiring process to attract strong candidates.

Districts decide which grade levels of teachers a coach will work with during a school year, and all teachers in that grade level work with the coach. Focusing coaches’ time on a particular grade level ensures that coaches have enough time to work intensively with teachers. More importantly, focusing on particular grades — as opposed to particular teachers — promotes a culture of continuous improvement where all teachers — not just those who are new, seen to be struggling, or serve the lowest-performing students — participate.

The institute works with coaches and principals for two to three years. Coaches meet with teachers in grade-level teams weekly. They engage teachers in on-site or one-on-one conferencing cycles monthly or even twice in a six- to eight-weeks period. These cycles include a reconference planning meeting; an in-classroom component that involves modeling, co-teaching, or observing teaching; and a post-conference to reflect on the lesson’s impact on student learning.

During their first year, coaches learn new instructional models, which they then practice and hone by teaching in front of other coaches. They become skilled lesson planners and, by working with other coaches individually and in small groups, they internalize the cognitive tools they will later use with teachers.

Once coaches start their work with teachers, they try out their new instructional strategies for teachers in the teachers’ classrooms. Afterward, they reflect with teachers on the impact of the coach’s instruction on student learning. Coaches also share with teachers the content-focused lesson plans they developed. This process builds the coaches as master teachers and creates a learning culture where both teachers’ and coaches’ methods are up for reflection and analysis.

One coach said that having other coaches direct questions to him (in the lesson planning sessions) helped him by presenting issues he hadn’t considered. When he ultimately met with teachers, he felt better prepared.

KEY FEATURES

So how does content-focused coaching eliminate the need for hard feedback? Here are several features that support this way of working.
CONTENT-FOCUSED ROUTINES SUPPORT LEARNING FOR EVERYONE
— INCLUDING COACHES

By Donna DiPrima Bickel, Tabetha Bernstein-Davis, and Lindsay Clare Matsumura

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Right-size the goals.

Content-focused coaching asks first that central office leaders work with principals to "right-size" the focus of the coach's work. Right-sizing means describing the overall goal of the coaching initiative in manageable, observable, and realistic terms, given the amount of time and effort expected from all roles (principals, coaches, and teachers). In the Institute for Education Sciences study, this means focusing on improving 4th- and 5th-grade students' reading comprehension by learning to engage students in rigorous, text-based discussions of worthy texts using open-ended, text-based questioning to support meaning-making.

Establish clear expectations.

Institute fellows work with teachers, principals, and key central office leaders to develop a common vision of the pedagogical practice, along with clear criteria for evaluation. In the Institute for Education Sciences study, the instructional practice was the Questioning the Author (Beck & McKeown, 2006) approach to text discussion, which was distilled into a set of guidelines. These guidelines form the criteria for fair and credible self-, peer-, and coach evaluation of the new practice. (See text discussion guidelines at right.)

Model receiving feedback.

Coaches model pedagogical practices for teachers, who learn to take descriptive, nonjudgmental notes on what they see and hear the coach do and that adheres to text discussion guidelines.

During repeated opportunities to observe these teaching models, teachers record evidence illustrating what the coach did that made one or more of the criteria in the guidelines (e.g., Marlin stopped reading in the middle of a paragraph to ask the students, "How does what we just learned in this passage fit with what we said before?"). Teachers think about the lesson's impact on student learning. Afterward, teachers discuss what they observed, using the evidence they wrote down, rather than merely stating unsupported opinions.

When coaches teach in front of others first, they demonstrate a willingness to be in the vulnerable position of the observed before taking on the role of observer. This lays the groundwork for a collegial and trusting relationship between teacher and coach that positions the coach as a thinking and discussion partner for teachers rather than as a judge of teacher performance.

Once teachers observe and give substantive feedback to the coach, they are more willing to present their practice to others and to listen to what others have to say about improving their practice.

Combine group learning and one-on-one coaching.

Content-focused coaching uses a gradual release of responsibility framework (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Coaches first provide teachers with video and live teaching models, then guided practice opportunities, and finally independent application (one-on-one coaching) in the classroom with a substantive coach feedback. After refining their understanding of the practice with their coach, teachers teach a lesson in front of their peers. Through these steps, teachers move from awareness of a new approach to instructing students independently.

GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNING TEXT DISCUSSIONS OF LITERARY AND INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

Based on the Questioning the Author approach

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LEARNING LAB: REFLECTION ROUNDS

Teachers can take descriptive notes as they observe a fellow (host) teacher teaching students. Participants provide substantive feedback about something they saw or heard. The host teacher الآوات that aligns with the practice under study and its impact on student learning.

REFLECTION ONE: EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

LEARNERS

Use observation notes to address questions such as:

- What specific responses did students make that are:
  - Evidence of their understanding of the intended learning?
  - Evidence of misunderstandings or confusions?
  - Evidence of the impact of certain instructional moves?
  - What might be the next learning for these students?

HOST TEACHER

Reflect on evidence of student learning using experience teaching the lesson, knowledge of student strengths and needs, progress over time, classroom dynamics, etc.

REFLECTION TWO: EVIDENCE OF TEACHER LEARNING AROUND FOCUS QUESTIONS

LEARNERS

Use observation notes to address questions such as:

- What did you see or hear the teacher or students say or do relative to the teacher's focus questions?
- What questions do you have that might prompt reflection?

HOST TEACHER

Use experience teaching this lesson to clarify or provide additional context based on the learners' reflections.

REFLECTION THREE: COMMITMENT AND ACTION STEPS

LEARNERS AND HOST TEACHER RELECT:

- What was new learning for me about our learning focus question?
- How did this observation deepen my understanding?
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- What are the implications of this observation for my practice?
- What additional professional learning do I need to support or sustain the instructional practices observed in this lesson?
- What should our next lesson be to build on this experience?

REFLECTION FOUR: LESSON OBSERVATION PROCESS

LEARNERS AND HOST TEACHER RELECT:

Was this lesson observation a useful professional learning opportunity? Why or why not?

- What were the most significant differences between the lesson modeled and the one observed?
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HOST TEACHER

Reflect on evidence of student learning using experience teaching the lesson, knowledge of student strengths and needs, progress over time, classroom dynamics, etc.
- Respond or not to any of the questions posed for reflection or clarification.

REFLECTION TWO: EVIDENCE OF TEACHER LEARNING AROUND FOCUS QUESTION

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Use observation notes to address questions such as:
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Was this lesson observation a useful professional learning opportunity? Why or why not?
- In what ways was the reflection process meaningful? How could the process be improved?
- How and when will we revisit our learning from this observation?

Use routines and cognitive tools.

One routine developed to support this vision of professional learning is the Learning Lab, in which teachers from the same school or across schools who teach the same content take notes while observing a fellow (host) teacher instruct students.
EVIDENCE-BASED REASONING TOOL
This tool lends structure to participants' comments.

Participants:
- Name what they saw or heard:
  - Identify how it aligns with/illustrates something they've been studying.
- Say what this seems to indicate in terms of teacher/student learning.
- Raise questions/comments about what they saw or heard.

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<td>The teacher is trying to support student learning by scaffolding the reading.</td>
<td>Was this necessary or could they have determined some of this by reading themselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bells said, &quot;I'm not sure that's right. Can we look at that again?&quot;</td>
<td>Students' commitment to accuracy.</td>
<td>Students have internalized the norm for classroom discussion.</td>
<td>What did this teacher do to support students to take on this role for themselves?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a preservice, round-robin sequence (see Learning Lab: Reflection Rounds on p. 37), teachers provide substantive feedback to the host teacher (after students leave) — specific, descriptive comments using the previously discussed criteria for effective implementation of the pedagogical practice — about something they saw or heard their peer do that aligns with the practice under study and its impact on student learning. The Evidence-Based Reasoning Tool (see above) shapes the substantive feedback to the host teacher in the Learning Lab. It lends structure to participants' comments by asking them to describe what they saw or heard, identify how this aligns with the practice (or something they have been studying as a group), say what this seems to indicate in terms of teacher/student learning, and finally, raise questions or comments about what they saw or heard.

These tools reduce a teacher’s anxiety about teaching in front of peers because they focus feedback on specific agreed-upon evidence/criteria, ensuring that judgments and evaluative language don’t overshadow an analysis of teaching and learning. Ideally, when professional learning communities are established and active, teachers can be both observer and observed, and the professional learning community becomes a venue for ongoing collaborative learning.

Using these cognitive tools and routines eliminates the need for hard feedback from coaches. It puts coaches and teachers more equal footing and makes feedback about teaching more palatable because it is focused squarely on the very specific pedagogical practices they have been studying as a group and practicing independently and with the coach. The criteria establishes clear expectations, and the evaluations by peers and coach is fair and credible.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES
A mid-sized urban district used this learning sequence recently with its 9th-grade English language arts teachers. Teachers attempting new pedagogies struggled with how to be faithful to the design while adjusting it to fit student needs. The Lab structure allowed a volunteer host teacher to explain how she used the institute’s curriculum materials with her class. Here are observations from teachers who participated:

- "I feel that the Learning Lab did help support our previous professional development, as we had the opportunity to see much of what we discussed in theory actually put into practice. Seeing how [the teacher] took the lesson and crafted it so her classroom and teaching style made me see that there is a little flexibility for me to make this lesson fit my teaching style."
- "I think it helped me while developing my teaching plan."

COACHES AS VALUED FACULTY MEMBERS
Rather than altering power relations and learning how to give hard feedback, coaches need school administrators who communicate publicly agreed-upon evidence for student outcomes and right-sized, clear expectations for pedagogical practices. Administrators also need to position coaches as valued faculty members on whom teachers can and should rely (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009).

When used regularly within professional learning communities, routines such as the Learning Lab, which focuses on agreed-upon criteria for evidence of teacher and student learning, along with tools like the Evidence-Based Reasoning Tool, which reheats the conversation, making everyone a learner, establishes the conditions necessary for improved teaching.

Comment-based coaching helps create these conditions by enacting effective coaching and opening dialogue among teachers. Coaches, as informed peers, can then contribute to each other’s learning, encouraging their own professional development and expanding their ability to raise student achievement levels.

REFERENCES

Lauren B. Hare, S. C. (2013). Literacy coaching to improve student reading achievement: A multi-level mediation model. Learning and Instruction Continued from p. 32

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EVIDENCE-BASED REASONING TOOL

THIS TOOL LENDS STRUCTURE TO PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS.

Participants:

• Name what they saw or heard:
  • How does it fit with what you've been studying?
  • What in the text made you pay attention?
  • Is it something you've seen before?

• Say what this seems to indicate in terms of teacher or student learning and development:
  • How does this affect the quality of instruction?
  • Is this a surprise or expected?
  • How does this relate to previous findings?

• Raise questions/comments about what they saw or heard:
  • What's missing?
  • What's surprising?
  • What's interesting?

1 Observation

2 Analysis

3 Interpretation of cause and effect

4 Questions or suggestions

I SAY OR HEARD:

The teacher provided a lot of feedback to the students about their progress and how they were doing.

I THINK:

The teacher is trying to help the students improve their writing skills.

I WONDERS:

Was this necessary? What was the purpose of providing this feedback?

REFERENCES:


What we learned from this talk:

Continued from p. 32

The teacher can be both observer and evaluator, and the profession can become a venue for engaging collaborative learning.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

A mid-sized urban school district used this learning experience recently with its 9th-grade English language arts teachers. Teachers attempting new pedagogies struggled with how to be effective in the design while adjusting to the student needs. The Lab structured a volunteer teacher to explain how she used the institution's curriculum materials with her class. Here are observations from teachers who participated:

• "We're trying new techniques in the classroom, and we need some feedback on how to adjust our teaching.

• "The teacher helped us understand the importance of providing feedback to students in a timely manner.

• "I feel like the Learning Lab helped me to think about my teaching in a new way.

INQUIRY AND EXPERTISE

Coogan-Smith and Lytle (1999) write that "knowledge of practice" is generated "when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation into the ways they perform their jobs as teachers" (p. 198). This study provides a concrete example of that convergence between well-structured collaborative teacher inquiry and well-timed, purposeful involvement of outside expertise.

Changes in instructional plans documented in this example would be unlikely to occur without this combination. The research fellow's facilitative actions serve as a useful example for other coaches and experts working to foster expanded visions of teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


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