

Peer Coaching Close-up

In the February issue we examined collegial circles in depth. In this issue we'll consider another collaborative professional learning community (PLC) model: Peer Coaching.

Educational consultant Pam Robbins defines peer coaching as "a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace."

Peer Coaching is a proven method of bringing about positive changes in classroom instruction and growth in teaching skills. The statistics below show why it is such an effective tool.

- 5% of learners transfer a skill into practice as a result of theory
- 10% will transfer a skill with theory plus *demonstration*
- 20% will transfer a skill with theory, demonstration and *practice*
- 25% will transfer a skill with theory, demonstration, practice and *feedback*
- 90% will transfer a skill with theory and demonstration, practice, feedback, and *coaching*

Peer coaching clearly enhances teachers' professional skills, but it offers other benefits as well. Coaching gives teachers a deeper sense of empowerment as they grow in their ability to analyze and improve their own teaching, gain a larger repertoire

of instructional strategies, feel a sense of renewal and recognition and acquire a better understanding of best practices. The resulting improvement in teacher practice generates increased student achievement.

What are the functions of successful peer coaching?

It gives companionship. Teachers talk about their successes and failures, reducing their sense of isolation. It provides feedback. Teachers give each other objective, non-evaluative feedback about how they are executing new skills. It fosters analysis. Teachers help each other to master a new approach until it becomes "second nature." It provides whatever support is needed as the teacher learns to apply a new skill.

What peer coaching activities can teachers embark on?

Informal practices include problem solving, study groups, curriculum development, co-planning lessons, storytelling about teaching practices, interdisciplinary planning and videotape analysis. Formal coaching activities are co-teaching, coach as collaborator, coach as mentor, coach as expert advisor and coach as a classroom mirror.

Before embarking on peer coaching there are some pre-conditions to consider. There must be a perception by those involved that they are good but can always get better. A reasonable level of trust must exist between the participants. They must be confident that no one is going to distort the situation in

any way. There must be an interpersonal climate that conveys that people care about and are willing to help one another.

There is a clear difference between coaching and evaluation. Evaluation typically is used to insure minimum standards are met, to assess beginning teachers or to appraise teachers in trouble. Peer coaching lies at the other end of the spectrum. It is non-judgmental, non-evaluative, non-threatening and non-competitive. It gives teachers equal stature and voice and fosters growth of confidence and trust. The person being coached sets the agenda. It is for **all** teachers.

This sounds like something for you, doesn't it? But how do you get started? First, you choose another interested faculty member with whom to pair. Then you arrange to meet to discuss your teaching situations, determine goals and get background for class visits (pre-conference). Next you schedule mutual classroom visits with specific observation assignments. Then you have follow-up conversations that generate positive change in practice (post-observation conference).

The *pre-conference* is used for planning. Before the lesson, the teacher shares and clarifies with the observer the lesson objectives, the context (what has led up to and will follow the lesson) and the sequence of events within the lesson. S/he then shares the experiment (teaching strategy or behaviors s/he will be trying) and the student behaviors
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“Let’s put our heads together and see what life we can create for our children.”

- Pam Robbins

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Peer Coaching Close-up (cont.)

s/he hopes to see and hear. Any concerns s/he has about the lesson are then voiced. S/he informs the observer what specific data s/he wants the observer to collect during the lesson and the form in which that data should be recorded. During the lesson the observer records literally whatever was agreed upon.

In the *post-observation conference* the teacher reflects with the observer and identifies feelings and impressions s/he had, recalls the data (what happened) in the lesson to support those feelings and then requests, analyzes and interprets the data the observer has collected. The observer shares the data and asks related questions. The teacher compares what was planned to what actually occurred. Together, with the teacher commenting first, they make inferences about what contributed to the success of the lesson or what might have interfered with intended outcomes. They synthesize and summarize insights and conclusions drawn from the lesson and ideas for application to further lessons. Together they close the conference by reflecting on the peer observation process and identifying ways to refine the process of working

together as peer observers.

Conferencing like this requires good communication skills! Here are several techniques to help peer coaches refine their communication with one another.

- *Question.* Use a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions to get both factual and broader deeper responses.
- *Paraphrase.* Use the teacher’s words when responding to insure accuracy.
- *Listen Actively.* Lean forward. Take notes. Don’t interrupt. Watch intently. Give plenty of time for reflection.
- *Probe for Specificity.* Ask clarifying questions. Request specific examples.
- *Provide Specific Feedback.* Base it on evidence observed in the classroom.
- *Reframe.* Shift the frame of reference in order to see from a fresh perspective.

It’s time to get started! For training to help you master these techniques and gain more understanding of the process, be sure to contact the teacher center. (*Excerpted from SETC training materials and Pam Robbins’ seminars.*)

Criteria for Effective Implementation of Peer Coaching.

1. First and foremost, the school’s climate is supportive of innovation and change.
2. There is a commitment to the coaching process in terms of time, money and symbolic support.
3. Participants share a common language about curriculum and teaching practices.
4. Participants receive training in coaching skills.
5. Participants have the opportunity to select the partner(s) with whom they will work.
6. The person being observed has the opportunity to determine which teaching practice will be observed.
7. The coaching procedures are negotiated in detail so that partners trust their agreements.
8. The feedback given is based on specific objective data.
9. The practices and consequences are examined as thoughtfully as the practices and consequences of teaching.

-Adapted from Judith Warren Little and Tom Bird

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Peer Coaching Websites

<http://webserver3.ascd.org/ossd/peercoaching.html>
New professional development survey to assess your school/district’s PD needs.
<http://www.teachersnetwork.org/tnpi/research/growth/becke.htm>

Peer coaching for the improvement of teaching and learning.
<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/schoolimprovement/development/howto/peercoaching> How to begin a Peer Coaching program.

http://buildingblocks.org/cfm_User/pg_strategyHome.cfm?strategyID=93 Using the Collaborative Coaching and Learning professional development model to transform teaching.