

Using Cases in the Ecological Development of Teacher Expertise: The Role, Nature, and Requirements of Coaching*

This brief presents an ecological approach to coaching teachers, including the conditions and practices that lead to effective teacher coaching. Based on years of reflective practice, a review of the literature on coaching, and the recent implementation of coaching for the Center's 8th grade implementation of ELA educative curriculum, the brief offers an ecological, interrelated and coherent approach to coaching in schools. We first define our conceptualization of coaching, to unpack necessary conditions and main threats to the endeavor.

What is Coaching?

Coaching is the critical support offered teachers as they design and implement agreed upon practices in order to enact them in contextually appropriate ways. Each individual teacher is at a different point in their development, thus, what to focus on for their improvement will need to be respond to their individual situation. There is not a coaching path sequenced in ways that everybody should follow invariably. Developmental paths, while principled -that is, guided by the same abstract understandings of good practice-, will vary from individual to individual.

Coaches assist colleagues in identifying the starting point for their development within an integrated view of quality learning, the overall goal. Coaches and coachees co-design a strategic plan for development which will unfold over time. This delicate work requires that a number of important conditions be met, among them:

- There is an evolving agreement that the practice of offering students quality learning opportunities is not prescribed nor fixed, but that it is principled and unfolds over time in response to vision and contextual circumstances, through processes of apprenticeship.
- There is a clear agreement -at least at the theoretical level- of what constitutes learning and how to promote it with rigor and generativity (the ability to use the new knowledge, applying it to diverse circumstances). Concepts such as understanding language as action, not as linguistic structure, the nature of optimal lessons, lesson design, academic rigor, the centrality of open but well structured student interaction, are shared by coach and coachee, and ideally also by the larger school community.

* Prepared by Aída Walqui, WestEd

- Another important pre-condition for successful coaching is the belief -present and observable throughout the relationship between coach and coachee- that all students can learn to high standards if deliberate and sustained work is offered them. By the same token, the belief that all teachers can improve provided the right amount of work and support. Both sets of convictions are essential and should be evident throughout.
- Coaches need to be recognized by colleagues as reflective practitioners themselves. In fact, if a teacher is going to be released to become a coach, it may be a good idea to have that new coach keep teaching one class. This class can then serve as a safe place for coaches to model and for coaches to critique pedagogy in action in an environment familiar to all.
- Coaches need to be good observers and listeners, judicious interpreters, and while knowledgeable, they cannot be imposing nor aggressive. In fact, while coaches have a keen sense of which actions they need to redirect and why, they do this work by engaging coachees in reflection, they ask questions, and listen attentively to continue the inquiry. While the final goal of coaching is ambitious, actions along the way need to be few, well-selected, and clearly defined.
- During coaching, coach and coachee's relationship is essential. We cannot fully trust somebody we just met, especially when the interaction relates to something as intimate as our own teaching. Gradually, coach and coachees build this relationship, as they plan lessons together, as they review student work, as they analyze teacher moves always with the goal of offering all students quality invitations to learn.
- Naturally, it follows that the relationship is not evaluative but supportive. Coaches do not share their observation notes with others. Coaching assumes a reciprocal pact in which the coach guides -through deliberate questioning- the enactment of a vision of quality in teaching. Conversely, the coachee invests effort, thought, and action into that improvement.
- Coach visits have to be fully planned, focused, and scheduled. Surprise visits -until there is strong trust and a reciprocal relationship- can backfire and repairing its impact may be impossible.
- Dosage: Ideally a teacher is at first coached once a week and then every two weeks over a period of a semester. Additionally, when coaches visits a class, initially at least, they spend the whole period in class, observing teacher and students, and taking descriptive notes of what is going on to then ask critical, focused questions of the teacher.

Individual or Group Coaching?

Collaborative coaching is becoming popular in the field and it can produce valuable results if carried out under the right circumstances. Some suggestions for its implementation follow:

- Individual connections should antecede group work. Moving the analysis of teaching from a private and individual endeavor to a public one has to begin with the group on equal footing. Teachers need to trust a) that coach and coaches share the same interest; b) that the goal of their interaction is improving learning for all of their students; and c) that the road ahead will require effort and work, avoiding one-upmanship at all costs.
- It is indispensable that coaching groups teach the same class and use roughly the same materials so that the same content is planned for, observed, and problematized by the group. This kind of coaching makes it possible for teachers to learn as part of their immediate work, to design optimal learning for their students, and to gain in professional self-awareness. During follow up coaching sessions, and once trust and comfort have been established, collaborating teachers can discuss variations in their appropriation of new ideas as well as their communal and individual next steps to follow.

Naturally, collaborative coaching also requires a number of meso-level pre-requisites to obtain. Mainly among them, the offering of common planning periods for the teachers involved, commitment by the administration not to use those times for other work, coherence in desired pedagogical practices. Ideally, too, and once the collaboration has been established, the ability for teachers to visit each other in well-planned ways.

Common Threats to Effective Coaching

Just because a school invests money in hiring one or two coaches, miracles are not going to happen unless the conditions outlined above are met. Key and common threats to the effectiveness of coaching include:

- Coaches are not selected for their expertise
- There is no school initiative that gives teachers a sense of where the school is headed, the role professional learning and coaching has in that objective.
- Lack of coherent understanding about the features of promoting learning, and coaching. For example, lessons are defined and developed in multiple ways by teachers being coached. Agreement on these vital issue is a pre-condition for coaching, which will reinforce and help teachers appropriate the practices valued by all.
- Multiplicity of pedagogical initiatives at the school, many at cross-purposes with each other.

- Coaches see themselves as evaluators, not as supporters of colleagues. Administrators ask them for evaluative comments on the teachers they are coaching.
- Because teachers have been used to working 7:30-3:30, a notion usually supported by their unions that oppose any work outside of hours, asking teachers to do work outside of school is difficult. Some recognition of these efforts include offering teachers in the coaching team common planning times, fewer preparations, coverage to visit each other.

All of these threats can be avoided by awareness and careful planning, of course. As you read a couple of vignettes, you will be problematizing some of these issues and offering viable and worthy alternatives to them.