

Coaching: A Beginning Coach's Story*

Claudia King loved teaching English Language Arts to middle schoolers, a job she had for 7 years. She especially enjoyed observing how her English Learners gained confidence with ideas and the ways of expressing them. In fact, all of her students became increasingly confident and enthusiastic readers, writers, and speakers in her class. The daughter of an accomplished teacher, her many years abroad as part of a military family who loved the experience of living in other countries, gave her a learning and intercultural perspective that valued multiple cultures, languages, and points of view.

When she started teaching, Claudia was receptive to opportunities to learn the craft and received good advice from her mother and others. Professional development workshops she had the opportunity to attend, however, were few, short, and each came from a different perspective, leading to confusion. That is why she eagerly accepted the opportunity to participate in the implementation of the Center's 8th grade educative curriculum, which she would be prepared for, and coached.

The professional development she received prior to the 12-week curriculum implementation, and the coaching during it, provided her with a framework to organize her ideas and practices into coherent lessons that led students into increasing participation and understanding. Now she had a clear rationale for why certain lessons and activities worked better than others. She especially liked the idea that no lesson, no matter how good it was, could be implemented as proposed. Thus, after the pilot was over, she started redesigning the lessons she was regularly given to implement by the district to render better results.

The district had a mandated ELA curriculum -written by ELA coaches- which consisted of 50-minute lessons centered on a simple text -no more than 3 or 4 paragraphs long. Through her professional development, she became aware that asking students to focus each day on a different topic, oftentimes trivial and condescending, could not create student enthusiasm nor rigorous learning. For that, as she could articulate now, teachers needed to focus on key, compelling ideas, and weave networks of understanding around them that students could discuss with each other, connect to their realities, and communicate to peers and others.

Claudia was willing to do the work -modeled by the educative curriculum- required to select arid lessons that had the potential to be enriched, or treated through other materials, intentionally proposing activities that would compel students to collaborate with each other as they built their understanding. The results were spectacular. During, and after the experimental curriculum, her

* Aída Walqui, WestEd, based on interviews with first year coaches

students were excited, active, and even attendance improved. The school where Claudia taught had the lowest performance in tests in the district. But, after she kept on teaching with quality beyond the trial, her students outperformed other students in 8th grade ELA classes.

Observing Claudia's classes results, the school principal asked her if she could coach her peers to become better teachers. She had to do it using the same mandated curriculum, however. She gladly accepted, eager to share what she had learned with colleagues.

When the year started, Claudia did not have an agreed schedule of visits, the principal told her to proceed as she thought would be best. She was, however, given a manual to guide her work. She started talking to colleagues teaching ELA in 7th and 8th grade. In general, their response was tepid, they would love some support, but they were too busy to welcome her in their classes.

Additionally, as she read the coaching manual, there were prescriptive lists of actions she had to engage in as a coach, mostly focused on classroom management, posture, and voice. but no attention was paid to how to engage students and support them as they built ideas, connected them, applied them, etc.

Trying to convince colleagues that they should be coached, Claudia mentioned that the principal had asked her to work with them, but most teachers responded they had been told nothing about it. She decided to just tell them know individually when she would be in their classes, and then visit accordingly.

The mandated curriculum required students to read in their assigned computers brief, unenticing readings and answer questions. There was no energy in the classes she visited, in fact, in a couple of the classes she observed, there were one or two students who were asleep. And, while students were 'reading' their electronic texts, the teacher seemed to be busy at her desk, working on class records which needed to be kept in order before every weekly mandated interim assessment.

What to do? Claudia tried her best. Of the five weekly readings for the 8th grade, she redesigned one and built a lesson where students were invited to interact as they prepared to read the re-written text and a carefully selected short story connected to the theme. She also wrote several interactive activities that would engage students in action as they read and made sense of the reading, and finally (although as she was working on the lesson, this is where she started) offered a project that helped students put together what they had learned to complete collaboratively and then individually, a new project. Most of her colleagues thought her efforts were unnecessary. Claudia would have loved to work together with 2 or 3 teachers in planning lessons, to then observe them individually, and after an individual conference get them together again to share their experiences and plan another lesson, but no time was provided for this collaboration. Instead, teachers needed to respond to a number of new initiatives in the school.

Three months into her coaching assignment, Claudia has been able to work with only two colleagues. They spend time together planning lessons, and she visits them frequently to support them with implementation. But she wonders what she can do with those who find her presence unnecessary and disrupting in class? What would have helped her?