

How to develop a coaching eye



"When coaching first emerged as a term for on-site staff development, the image that came to mind for many was demonstration lessons. 'I go in and model, and the teacher should do what I model.' But the role is much more complex."

— *Kristine Woleck, a mathematics coach from New Canaan, Conn.*

BY STEPHANIE FEGER, KRISTINE WOLECK, AND PAUL HICKMAN

As schools and districts explore how coaching fits into their professional development plans, they must identify the essential skills and supports needed for this complex role. Teachers, school leaders, and coaches must begin by asking: What skills are needed for coaching? What coaching strategies enhance the coach-teacher interaction? What kinds of support do coaches need? And teachers and staff developers taking on this assignment have to learn to look at what's happening in the classroom using a "coaching eye" instead of a "teaching eye."

Online seminars create
a learning community
where coaches can share
experiences and insights

"The coach works alongside the teacher, posing questions and facilitating reflection on teaching practice," says Kristine Woleck, a mathematics coach from New Canaan, Conn., and one of the authors of this article. Woleck has facilitated three sessions of an online seminar designed to help elementary mathematics coaches define their coaching role and build a repertoire of coaching strategies. The seminar, "Leading the Way: Coaching Teachers Using Investigations," was developed in fall 2001 by the Center for the Enhancement of Science and Mathematics Education at Northeastern University (CESAME) and The Education Alliance at Brown University through its Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory program (LAB). Through analyzing participant interviews and registration profiles, archives of online

contributions, and seminar evaluations from more than 50 coaches who participated in the online seminar during the past three years, as well as Woleck's classroom action research and relevant literature, the collaborating staffs from CESAME and LAB have learned about some of the skills, strategies, and supports coaches need to be successful.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

While coaching primarily involves working one-on-one with teachers to support them in the classroom, it also includes training groups and even advocating for coaching when coaches are members of district-level committees. In these varied roles, coaches need specific knowledge and skills:

- **Interpersonal skills.**

Communicating and establishing trusting relationships with teachers

FRAMING THE COACHING ROLE

Recent studies on coaching (Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Poglinco, et al., 2003; Richard, 2003) note that coaches may be specialized full- or part-time staff developers, or they may be teachers making a career transition to coaching. Coaches frequently work one-on-one with a teacher directly in the classroom and meet with the teacher before or after a lesson. They may use student work as a springboard to talk about teaching strategies or as help to plan next steps for instruction. Susan Poglinco et al. define coaching as "a form of inquiry-based learning characterized by collaboration between individual, or groups of, teachers and more accomplished peers" (p. 1).

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who are trying to change their practice requires being sensitive to their dilemmas, fears, and celebrations. Coaches must be able to observe accurately and provide teachers with appropriate feedback about their practice in a respectful and collaborative manner. Coaches also may serve as a liaison between teachers and administrators, requiring that they advocate for teachers while also working with administrators to move forward with specific goals

and to create a learning community in the school as a whole.

• **Content knowledge.**

Coaches must have a deep understanding of subject matter, including how knowledge of a discipline is developed through curricula and learning materials. Experience with coaches at the elementary level indicates that a certain level of content-area expertise is necessary to be a subject-area coach.

However, expertise also may create tension when coaches are labeled

experts. Most important is for a coach to establish a collaborative, reflective relationship with a teacher, not to tell the teacher what to do, but serve instead as a knowledge resource and a mediator to help the teacher reflect.

• **Pedagogical knowledge.**

To lead, coaches need to understand how children learn, including a deep knowledge of the tasks, questioning strategies, and classroom structures that can help students develop ideas.

• **Knowledge of the curriculum.**

Familiarity with the structures and experiences offered by a particular curriculum is essential, including understanding the fundamental ideas behind the curriculum and how those ideas connect across grade levels.

• **Awareness of coaching resources.**

Coaches need specific knowledge of professional development materials, literature, and resources that can be used to support a teacher's development of subject or pedagogical knowledge or help teachers better understand how to teach for understanding.

• **Knowledge of the practice of coaching.**

Coaches must know coaching strategies and structures, such as how to use pre- and post-conferences or on-the-spot coaching; the role of questioning and effective strategies; how to use artifacts of teaching practice (curriculum materials, student work, scripts of classroom dialogue, etc.); and the pros and cons of demonstration lessons. Coaches also must understand the multiple roles of a coach in the classroom. For instance, a coach may plan a lesson with a teacher, co-teach a lesson alongside a teacher, observe particular students, or create a transcript of a class discussion to examine with the teacher in a post-lesson meeting.

HELPING COACHES BUILD THEIR REPERTOIRE OF STRATEGIES

Good coaching is scarce, posing a challenge not only for school systems, but also for coaches who need support to reflect on and improve their practice. Data from the online seminars points to some strategies that support coaches' development. Focusing on the practical problems coaches face is one effective way to help coaches improve their work. For example, the online seminars use case studies that describe a realistic coaching scenario to focus coaches' attention on critical themes and problem-solving examples. Another key strategy is creating a learning community where coaches can share their experiences and insights. The online seminars use online discussions to create such a community, enabling coaches

to discuss the pros and cons of strategies they can use when working with teachers. Two coaching strategies used with teachers that sparked the most interest during the seminars were questioning and demonstration lessons.

COACHING STRATEGY:

QUESTIONS ABOUT QUESTIONS

Questions are the tools of the trade. But questioning can be tricky for someone new to coaching. As one coach from Washington who participated in the seminar said, "I sometimes find myself feeling that when I am questioning teachers, they feel put on the spot and can become uncomfortable. That balance is difficult to find, especially when you are establishing a relationship."

Balancing the manner of questioning and the timing of delivery can affect the success of a coaching session. Coaches must maintain a collaborative, trusting relationship with teachers so the teacher sees the coach's questions as prompts for reflection, not critical judgments that put the teacher on the defensive. For the coach, this means phrasing genuine questions for reflection rather than questions with a single correct answer, and waiting for the teacher to respond. Silence following a question can make a coach feel uncomfortable, but that may be time in which the teacher reflects.

When coaching questions are grounded in student work and student learning, the dialogue between teacher and coach can maintain a collaborative spirit, with a common goal to improve student learning. Coaches need to keep questions focused on curriculum and student needs. For example, three focused questions to pose when working with teachers in the mathematics classroom are:

- What is the mathematics?
- What does this piece of student work, or this student's response, tell

us about what this child understands?

- What might you do next?

Effective questioning takes experience — learning to use this framework, putting the strategy into practice during a coaching session with a teacher, and assessing the effectiveness of the questions in prompting teacher reflection and growth.

COACHING STRATEGIES

DEMONSTRATING AND CO-TEACHING

Coaches traditionally have used demonstration lessons to support teacher growth, but demonstration lessons should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Coaches have to be careful not to threaten the trusting relationship they have worked to build.

How do coaches decide when to demonstrate a lesson? Coaches don't want the teacher to depend on a coach to teach a class lesson. But teachers often ask for a demonstration lesson because that's what they see as coaching or they want to assess a coach's credibility. Demonstrating a lesson can let a coach communicate to a teacher that she is willing to collaborate and take on the challenges the teacher tackles every day.

Demonstration lessons can help teachers experience a strategy outside their paradigm. "For some teachers, seeing is believing," noted one coach in the seminar. Another participant outlined a potential problem with demonstration lessons: "If the teacher simply sits back and watches the coach, what investment has he/she made in this lesson, and what learning has taken place for this teacher?"

To avoid creating a one-shot situation without follow-up, coaches should meet with the teacher before the demonstration lesson to talk about the students' and teacher's understanding of the lesson, and again after the demonstration on that day to debrief.

Effective demonstration lessons can establish an active role for the teacher as an observer, perhaps through providing focus questions for note-taking during the lesson, or designating a student for the teacher to observe. This puts the teacher in the role of researcher, providing material that can serve as a springboard for discussion about specific aspects of the lesson during a follow-up conversation with the coach.

Co-teaching is another useful strategy. In co-teaching, the teacher leads the lesson alongside the coach. The coach and teacher meet prior to the lesson to plan together how to focus on the student learning goals, what questions and materials best support these goals, and on which aspect of the lesson the teacher would most like feedback. The coach provides as little or as much support to the teacher during the lesson as needed; this may entail modeling some questioning techniques during a class discussion or asking the teacher to shadow the coach as they listen in on small-group discussions and offer suggestions for further exploration to some children. After co-teaching, the coach and teacher discuss the lesson.

Follow-up is critical. As one Missouri coach said, "Having enough time is always a problem. I have had to do some of my post-observation conferences out on the playground with children at recess. (But) the conversations have to be held in whatever way they can be managed. Without them, the demo lesson is pointless."

COACHING SUPPORT:

A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Coaches need opportunities to:

- Deepen their content and pedagogical knowledge;
- Become aware of new professional development resources and materials that can be used in coaching interactions;
- Examine coaching situations and

determine what makes a coaching strategy effective (e.g. through case studies);

- Objectively reflect on their own coaching work, to examine the coaching strategies they use and the effects on teacher growth, progress over time, the work's overall focus, and next steps for their work.

For those taking on the coaching role, access to colleagues (whether through an online seminar or another professional network) can be a critical resource for strategies and a lifeline for learning how to manage the new situations they face along the way. Connecting with others undertaking the same work through in-district meetings, face-to-face study groups, or online seminars allows coaches to share the wealth of emotions that accompany this work and have their emotions validated by others experiencing similar situations. This community also helps a coach overcome the feelings of isolation that can often accompany the position.

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COACHING SUPPORT:

CASE STUDIES

Case studies in the online seminar jump-started the discussions of weekly topics. The seminar participants analyzed key concepts from the cases and related them to different coaching situations. Reading and responding to the case studies helped participants study moments that were turning points in coaching and provided an opportunity to reflect upon issues and events drawn from real situations that emerge in professional settings.

The coaches' dialogue, through messages posted in the seminar, was an important part of their professional development as they reflected on their own coaching and what they were

learning. The resulting writing also became a record of the strategies discussed and how to use them. This ongoing dialogue about practical problems made the seminar relevant to each participant and helped them develop a learning community.

As one seminar participant said, "Being the only math coach in the district, I have no one to bounce ideas off or to share thoughts about what I do, plan to do, or want to do. It was good to have the support of a community of folks doing the same thing and hear about what they were doing, successfully or not!"

Peer-to-peer learning can be particularly effective when one colleague has greater experience, and the coach can be coached. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) suggest that learning and practice are closely tied together because learning is situated in the activities and culture in which it takes place. In these social contexts, described by Lave and Wenger as communities of practice, learning occurs as a novice acquires the behaviors and practice of those with greater know-how.

In addition to learning from peers with different levels of experience, coaches are able to transfer learning from other organizations or settings to their own. This involves the concept of reciprocity (Nooteboom, 2000). Through joining in peer discussion, participants gain insights into practices and experiences that differ from their own — and thus complement their knowledge. Learning about what is going on in other places serves as a way of testing practice, comparing experiences with others. These exchanges not only validate personal experience, but also create a key support for coaches: a learning community.

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