

# Reflections on Cognitive Coaching

Robert Garmston with Christina Linder and Jan Whitaker

**Cognitive coaching can help teachers expand their repertoire of teaching styles, exploring untapped resources within themselves.**

Recently I acted as cognitive coach to two teachers at Marina Village School in El Dorado Hills, California. Christina Linder is an 8th grade teacher with a global, intuitive teaching style, and Jan Whitaker is a 7th grade teacher whose teaching style is detail-oriented and analytical. Both teachers volunteered for Cognitive Coaching; their different teaching styles were not a prerequisite for participation.

Despite the differences in their styles, Cognitive Coaching served both teachers. Cognitive Coaching does not require a teacher to follow a "formula," nor does it present a preconceived template of "correct" instruction. Instead, it supports teachers' existing strengths while expanding previously unexplored capacities.

Cognitive Coaching is a process during which teachers explore the thinking behind their practices. Each person seems to maintain a cognitive map, only partially conscious. In Cognitive Coaching, questions asked by the coach reveal to the teacher areas of that map that may not be complete or consciously developed. When teachers talk out loud about their thinking, their decisions become clearer to them, and their awareness increases.

For example, Whitaker had been extremely curriculum-based in her approach to teaching, focusing the majority of her time and attention on the details of each activity. She was dispensing knowledge and successfully keeping the students

engaged, but, as she noted at the end of the coaching experience, at the expense of some aspects of the students' cognitive development and personal growth.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Linder focused her teaching globally, with rich attention paid to the affective domain. In encouraging a focus that was more often than not subjective, she taught through exploration. Learning specific facts was often sacrificed in attainment of the broader goal.

As the two teachers went through the process of Cognitive Coaching, they found themselves drawing closer together in their thinking and teaching styles, seeing the advantages of both the detailed and the big picture. Although we met as a group only at the beginning and end of the project, the teachers informally compared insights and notes about their coaching experiences throughout the four months of the coaching process. They realized that the coaching process was building a bridge across their differing styles. Though clearly each still favored her own dominant style, the Cognitive Coaching made way for alternative thought processes.

## **The Cognitive Coaching Process**

Cognitive Coaching uses a three-phase cycle similar to teacher evaluation through clinical supervision: preconference, observation, and postconference. The primary difference between Cognitive Coaching and evaluation is that Cognitive Coaching uses these cycles for the sole purpose of helping the teacher improve instructional effectiveness by becoming more reflective about teaching. While the preconference requires a teacher to articulate the day's goals and the postconference calls for assessment, the teacher, not the coach, evaluates the lesson's success.

Rooted in the clinical supervision theories of Goldhammer and Cogan, Cognitive Coaching adds to clinical supervision the dimension of

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*self-reflection*

enhancing teachers' intellectual growth (Costa and Garmston 1985, in *ibid.*; Garmston 1990). It requires extensive coaching skills and teaches a set of strategies for creating a school environment that fosters teachers' abilities to make changes in their own thinking and teaching. The process supports informed teacher decision making.

The ultimate goal of Cognitive Coaching is teacher autonomy: the ability to self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-evaluate. In early cycles of Cognitive Coaching, the coach must draw these capacities from the teacher, but as the cycles continue, a teacher begins to call upon them internally and direct them toward an area of personal interest.

The Cognitive Coaching that Christina Linder, Jan Whitaker, and I experienced was unique in two ways. First, we did not know one another prior to beginning the program. I was a part of the school or even the district staff, but came from a university and consulting practice. Second, the coaching relationship was consultative rather than reciprocal. In consultative coaching, teachers need not learn the coaching skills themselves, and a greater tendency exists for them to cast the coach in the role of the "expert." With these cautions in mind, we believe that our experience of Cognitive Coaching can apply to reciprocal or consultative arrangements of peer or supervisory coaching (Garmston 1987). To document the changes in thinking, we kept private journals of our reflections.

### Diving In

Preconference discussions revolved around four basic questions: (1) What are your objectives? (2) How will you know when you've reached your objectives? (3) What is your plan? and (4) On what other aspects of your teaching do you want information? These initial questions were easy to

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answer and clarified the objectives for the day's lesson.

Each teacher requested that I make notes of student-teacher interactions. Whitaker was interested in quantitative information—how many and what kinds of interactions took place.

Linder was interested in a more qualitative aspect of her teaching and how her students felt about a playful yet sarcastic pattern of response she often used with them.

Observations were unobtrusive and did not increase the teachers' anxiety, but my probing questions, paraphrasing, and effective (if uncomfortable) use of silence and wait time during postconferences produced distinct responses from the two teachers. After the first conference, Linder wrote:

While Dr. Garmston's piercing questions and silences caught me off guard, I found our conference amusing. It forced me to expose some of the weaknesses I had often suspected existed in my teaching. The kind of Socratic dialogue that we engaged in forced me to be introspective in my analysis of the day's lesson.

For Whitaker, however, the initial postconferences were uncomfortable. At first, she could not freely share her thoughts. At her first postconference, I felt a bit intimidated by the quickness and brevity of her responses. As Whitaker wrote in her journal:

Because of my personality type, I had a more difficult time establishing trust in the coaching process. I felt uncomfortable opening my teaching up for such intimate analysis and not knowing where this process would lead me. When questions forced me to be more introspective, I tended to shut down.

Both of the teachers initially tried to find the "right" answers to the questions that I posed. Linder noted:

We both knew that we floundered for "correct answers" rather than honest answers for two reasons: (1) Neither one of us noticed enough of our decision-making process while we were teaching to make self-judgments, and (2) Neither of us felt sure enough of the reasons behind Dr. Garmston's questions or what our ultimate goal was to shape our answers into "acceptable" units of information.

Whitaker said she "found the questions intellectually stimulating, yet was torn between giving honest answers and answers that a 'good' teacher would give."

Only one frustration surfaced, during the first cycle of Cognitive Coaching: both teachers wanted answers. I had my own internal struggle on this question:

How does the coach maintain a coaching stance of mediating teacher thinking while not hiding useful information? In both cases, I saw moments where teachers wanted information and were not able to produce ideas for themselves (perhaps my questioning was not skillful enough and/or perhaps we were not deeply enough into a trust relationship). In each of the settings I moved to a direct stance of providing information.

Why did I offer ideas instead of maintaining a purely mediative stance at these points? I think for four reasons: (1) The teacher asked for ideas; (2) I responded with a query that was *not* successful in generating teacher options; (3) I then asked permission to provide information; and (4) I felt that at this early stage, in

order to develop a trusting and collaborative relationship, my long-term goal of learning the skills and habits of teacher reflection needed to be secondary to the teachers' immediate need to know.

### **Finding the Balance**

After four months of working together, we shared our journals. The two teachers reported very different responses to the mechanics of the coaching process, yet equally satisfying results: changes in teaching style, expanded teaching repertoire, greater power in planning lessons, greater student accountability, and greater consciousness of teacher behaviors and options. As the effects of the Cognitive Coaching experience gradually made their way to a level of consciousness, both teachers found that their teaching needed a greater balance between the analytic and the intuitive styles. Furthermore, they had to move closer to that balance.

In effect, the teachers believed that Cognitive Coaching seemed to facilitate access to the "lesser used" sides of their brains. For example, while Whitaker and Linder were asked the same questions at the start of the

When faced with self-analysis, the teachers searched every corner of their minds, letting feelings and ideas surface that might have otherwise gone untapped.

## **Christina Linder's Journal: Becoming More Aware of Students' Needs**

The postconference inquiries forced me to look beyond what I had been content to call "gut instincts," and realize that I was unaware in most cases of the motivations behind the decisions I made while teaching. Because I could not easily answer Dr. Garmston's questions, especially in the first cycles of coaching, the silences that followed seemed like reproaches. It was in these silences, however, that I could feel an emerging awareness bubbling just below the surface of my consciousness.

In the first coaching cycle, I found that I wanted answers given to me instead of working out the questions for myself. In the last cycle, however, the reasons behind my questions changed. I found that when I asked for information, it came from a sincere desire for knowledge to supplement the areas of my newly discovered weaknesses, not the need to fill uncomfortable silences.

Even after only one cycle of coaching, some vague notions I had about my teaching style began to crystallize. I had always known that I would benefit from being more "organized," but suddenly I realized that my real growth relied on much more than a clean file cabinet. I could see that I had the means to more precisely structure my approaches to teaching, but those skills had gone unrefined—sacrificed to my more global, intuitive style. In learning to truly analyze my lessons, I found I could salvage bits and pieces that did work and redefine what didn't.

I had often suspected that specific student needs had been sacrificed at times in attainment of the broader

goal. After a few coaching cycles, I learned to focus less on the "experience" that a lesson would produce and more on specific feedback I might expect from students.

The most exciting result of my Cognitive Coaching experience was the improved quality in teacher-student interactions. I began to use discussion time more effectively, thinking in advance of how to ask one or two questions that directly addressed my learning goal, as opposed to my usual "shot-gun" techniques.

Even more important, however, was uncovering the great inequity in my interactions with various students. I discovered that I had developed two distinct patterns of response with my kids. I offered limited feedback for both the very bright and the low-ability students. Accurate, intelligent answers were quickly acknowledged—I knew that the student "got it" so I moved on to someone who "needed" me. Low-ability students were also met with equally brief interactions, but based on my feeling that the students had not really attempted to meet me halfway.

This left the middle-of-the-road student for my full attention. Such students could expect their answers to be paraphrased and new questions asked of them. They also received consistent doses of praise as they worked with me to meet my expectations.

I am now aware of qualitative discrepancies, and each student is much more likely to benefit from my full attention regardless of academic ability.

## Jan Whitaker's Journal: Opening to Creativity

The questions proposed by Dr. Garmston raised an awareness regarding both weaknesses and strengths in my teaching. By asking for specific cues about student learning, interaction, and long-range goals, they made me think about the lesson I had just taught. Much of the discomfort I felt related to the feeling I have when I am being evaluated.

Although confident that I am a competent teacher, having an observer in my class suddenly raises feelings of self-doubt and skepticism.

Prior to Cognitive Coaching, my students dissected bits of information that eventually directed us toward the broader picture. Once a lesson was taught, that part of the curriculum had been covered; another chapter in the district-mandated guide was complete. I seldom considered the affective domain of a lesson. Because of Cognitive Coaching, I broadened my level of consciousness, concentrating on goals that instilled craftsmanship, explored creativity, and developed self-esteem.

After I experienced a few Cognitive Coaching sessions, I realized it wasn't the material that was important, but how it caused thinking in my students. Missing in my very detailed and organized lessons was the opportunity for students to develop creativity,

craftsmanship, application, analysis, and higher levels of thinking. As a result of Cognitive Coaching, I began to be more flexible and questioned students in a way that demanded a more introspective analysis of the material. I valued students' input in designing lessons, not only building relevance into lessons but building self-esteem.

As a result of Cognitive Coaching, I learned about teacher response patterns, use of praise and criticism, and interaction with individual students, as opposed to whole-class interaction. Because of my cognitive style, I was interested in information that gave specific, quantitative answers, like how many interactions were made during a class period. My goal was to increase interactions with a larger number of students. I internalized Dr. Garmston's methods of collecting data, and while a lesson was in progress, I could make adjustments to include different students practicing a variety of questioning strategies.

I began to see the classroom as a big-screen movie from the perspective of an interested audience instead of a shortsighted director. As a concerned spectator, I was able to provide necessary guidelines, let students search for their own answers, and use the curriculum to direct us toward a climactic ending.

postconference periods. Whitaker felt the questions were designed to elicit a personal response, while Linder felt they forced objectivity. Linder wrote:

As we now test the knowledge and insights gained from this experience, the process has forced me to be more analytical. Jan feels that Cognitive Coaching has forced her to focus on creativity.

When faced with self-analysis, and in most cases what the teachers called "self-remediation," the teachers searched every corner of their minds, letting feelings and ideas surface that might have otherwise gone untapped.

Both Whitaker and Linder became better thinkers and, therefore, better teachers, by becoming more fully bicognitive (Guild and Garger 1985). To be bicognitive means to be able to attend to both relationship *and* task, to be both student- *and* teacher-centered. Through Cognitive Coaching, the teachers began to internalize and use with their students the coaching behaviors of gathering data, questioning, probing, and paraphrasing.

Clearly, Cognitive Coaching is a powerful process for fostering collegiality, deepening reflective skills, and developing cognitive autonomy, and, as such, it deserves further study. First, the nonroutine nature of teachers' work requires complex, contextual decision-making and an inquiry-oriented approach to practice (Lipton 1993). The reflection learned through Cognitive Coaching helps develop problem-solving skills as teachers examine their experience; generate alternatives, and evaluate actions. Second, current school reforms require collaborative cultures where practitioners reflect on their practice. Cognitive Coaching increases comfort with such professional inquiry and supports

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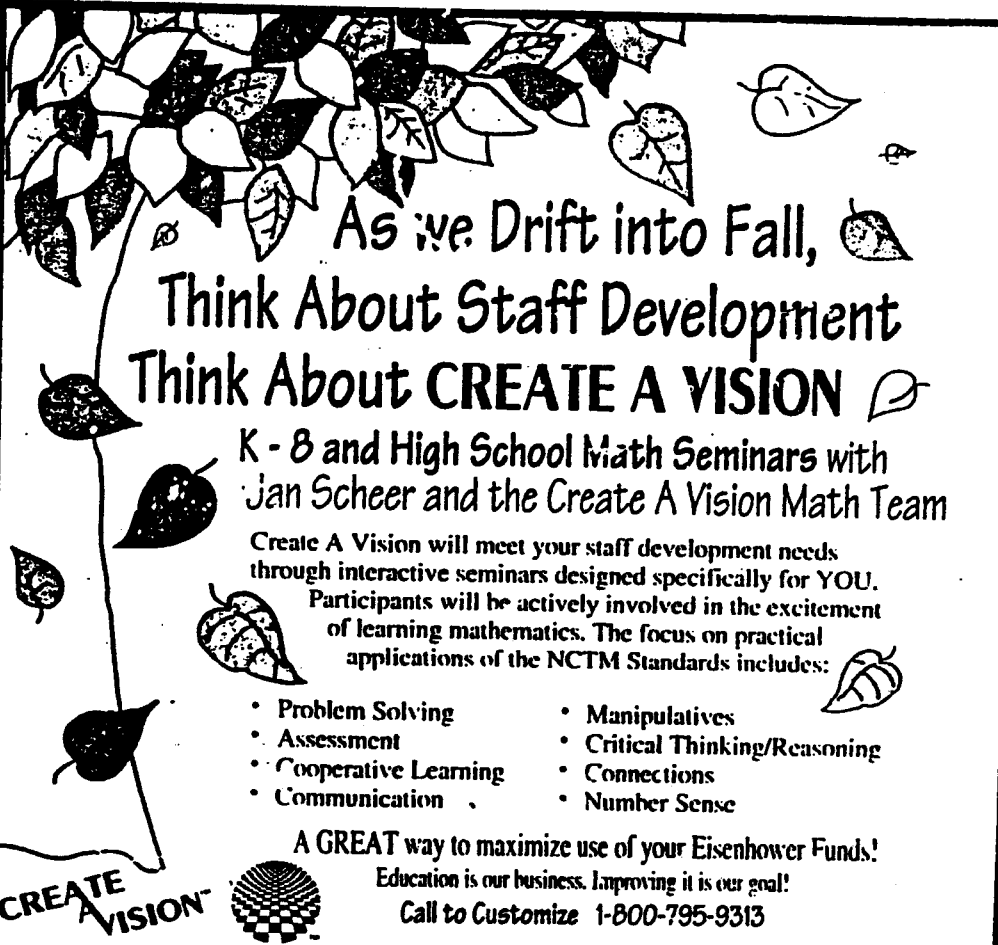
experimentation and continued professional growth. Finally, educators need to model risk taking, open-mindedness, and continuous learning to create schools that are communities of learners. Cognitive Coaching promotes these values.

As a result of the Cognitive Coaching experience, both Whitaker and Linder have encouraged development of other peer relationships within their schools. They are enthusiastic about extending and sharing their knowledge of coaching both on-site and at the district level. Having personally realized the benefits of intellectually rigorous coaching, they are taking steps to learn how to cognitively coach other colleagues. As Whitaker noted in one of her final journal entries:

Cognitive Coaching raised to consciousness a self-evaluation and self-analysis procedure. I internalized questions that were asked of me and began asking them myself: How did you know the lesson was a success? How did you feel about the lesson? How can you use what we have discussed in future lessons? Questions like these helped broaden my awareness of not only the success of my students, but the success of my teaching.

Now, I am asking myself, what can I do to help other teachers experience this freedom and power in teaching? ■

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