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The Evolution of Peer Coaching

Today, peer coaching study teams enhance staff development efforts and offer support for teachers implementing new strategies.

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Fifteen years have passed since we first proposed peer coaching as an on-site dimension of staff development (Joyce and Showers 1980). In the 1970s, evaluations of staff development that focused on teaching strategies and curriculum revealed that as few as 10 percent of the participants implemented what they had learned. Rates of transfer were low even for those who had volunteered for the training. Well-researched curriculum and teaching models did not find their way into general practice and thus could not influence students' learning environments.

In a series of studies beginning in 1980, we tested hypotheses related to the proposition that regular (weekly) seminars would enable teachers to practice and implement the content they were learning. The seminars, or coaching sessions, focused on classroom implementation and the analysis of teaching, especially students' responses.

The results were consistent: Implementation rose dramatically, whether experts or participants conducted the sessions. Thus we recommended that teachers who were studying teaching and curriculum form small peer coaching groups that would share the learning process. In this way, staff development might directly affect student learning.

Our central concern has been helping students benefit when their teachers learn, grow, and change. In studying how teachers can create better learning environments for themselves (Joyce and Showers 1995), we noted with interest a serendipitous by-product of the early peer coaching studies: Successful peer coaching teams developed skills in collaboration and enjoyed the experience so much that they wanted to continue their collegial partnerships after they accomplished their initial goals. Why not create permanent structures, we wondered, that would enable teachers to study teaching on a continuous basis?

In working with this broadened view of peer coaching as a mechanism to increase classroom implementation of training, we evolved our present practice of organizing entire faculties into peer coaching teams. We have been convinced throughout that peer coaching is neither an end in itself nor by

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March 1996

itself a school improvement initiative. Rather, it must operate in a context of training, implementation, and general school improvement. There is no evidence that simply organizing peer coaching or peer study teams will affect students' learning environments. The study of teaching and curriculum must be the focus.

Here we examine the history of coaching, describe changes in the conduct of coaching, and make recommendations for its future, including its role as a component of staff development that drives organizational change.

History of Peer Coaching

Pre-1980. The processes of training and implementation have come under close scrutiny only in the last 25 years. Beginning in the mid-1950s, national movements to improve education focused on academic quality and social equality. By the early 1970s, educators recognized that many of those efforts, even when well-funded and approved by the public, seldom led to changes. The lack of research on how people learn teaching strategies and how schools successfully disseminate innovations contributed to our failures. Educators assumed that teachers could learn new strategies, return to a school, and implement their new learning smoothly and appropriately. The organization of the schools did not support the intensive training efforts that occurred in summer institutes or workshops during the year, however. Initial diagnoses attributed the failure to "flaws" in the motivation, effort, and attitudes of the teachers rather than to the state of the organization or the design of training.

1980-1987. We began to believe that changes in the school organization and in training design could solve implementation problems or ease them greatly, and that assigning the blame to teachers was erroneous. Our understanding of how people learn new behaviors and put them into practice has continuously evolved, as a result of work by colleagues in schools and universities and our own efforts with teachers and schools.

When we first advanced the notion of coaching, we had just completed an exhaustive review of literature on training and presented our findings as a set of hypotheses about types of training likely to produce results. The training components discussed in that early work grew from what we found in the literature: theory presentation, modeling or demonstration, practice, structured and open-ended feedback, and in-class assistance with transfer.

In 1980, we believed that "modeling, practice under simulated conditions, and practice in the classroom, combined with feedback" (Joyce and Showers 1980, p. 384) was the most productive training design. We hypothesized that teachers attempting to master new curriculum and teaching approaches would need continued technical assistance at the classroom level. For purposes of research, we distinguished between the initial development of a skill that would permit a teacher to experiment with new teaching strategies, and the classroom practice of that skill until it had become a part of the teacher's repertoire. At that time, training designs for skill development were much better developed than were designs for conditions that would lead to transfer.

In the early '80s, we formally investigated the hypothesis that coaching, following initial training, would result in much greater transfer than would training alone (Showers 1982, 1984). We confirmed this hypothesis. We assumed that the coach needed to have more expertise in the content area, and thus paired teachers with an outside consultant or an expert peer. The literature on supervisory practices and feedback influenced our thinking as we struggled to create the kind of structured feedback that appeared to facilitate skill development.

Results of our early studies showed that teachers who had a coaching relationship—that is, who shared

aspects of teaching, planned together, and pooled their experiences—practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more appropriately than did their counterparts who worked alone to expand their repertoires. Members of peer-coaching groups exhibited greater long-term retention of new strategies and more appropriate use of new teaching models over time (Baker and Showers 1984).

Coaching helped nearly all the teachers implement new teaching strategies. Equally important, teachers introduced to the new models could coach one another, provided that the teachers continued to receive periodic follow-up in training settings. Thus we recommended that schools organize teachers into peer coaching teams and arrange school settings so that the teachers could work together to gain sufficient skill to affect student learning. We had moved from the '50s and '60s, where the probability of implementation was extremely low, to a very simple technology that virtually reversed the odds. The coaching process was added to the training paradigm, taking into account the two levels of skill development described above.

Current practice. We conducted the early studies with individual teachers or small groups within a school. The next stage involved faculties that volunteered as a whole, which required collaborating with staffs to determine their students' most pressing needs, selecting appropriate content, helping them design training, and assessing the impact on students. Increasingly we have found that attention to the social organization is extremely important. We now ask entire faculties to decide whether they want the school site to work with us, and we discuss at length exactly how we might work together.

Principles of Peer Coaching

Numerous staff development practices are called "coaching." These include "technical coaching," "collegial coaching," "challenge coaching," "team coaching," "cognitive coaching," and uses of "peer coaching" (Garmston 1987) to refer to the traditional supervisory mode of

pre-conference/observation/post-conference. None of these should be confused with, or used for, evaluation of teachers.

Similar to our approach, technical coaching, team coaching, and peer coaching (as in peer clinical supervision) focus on innovations in curriculum and instruction (Kent 1985, Neubert and Bratton 1987, Rogers 1987), whereas collegial coaching and cognitive coaching aim more at improving existing practices (Garmston et al. 1993). All except team coaching differ from our practice in that their primary vehicle for improving or changing classroom instruction is verbal feedback.

Following are our principles of peer coaching.

1. When we work with entire faculties, all teachers must agree to be members of peer coaching study teams. Teams must collectively agree to (a) practice or use whatever change the faculty has decided to implement; (b) support one another in the change process, including sharing planning of instructional objectives and developing materials and lessons; and (c) collect data about the implementation process and the effects on students relative to the school's goals.
2. We have found it necessary and important to omit verbal feedback as a coaching component. The primary activity of peer coaching study teams is planning and developing curriculum and instruction in pursuit of shared goals. Especially when they are learning teaching strategies designed for higher-order outcomes, teachers need to think through their overarching goals, as well as the specific objectives leading to them. Collaborative planning is essential if teachers are to divide the labor of developing new lesson and unit sequences and use one another's products.

When teachers try to give one another feedback, collaborative activity tends to disintegrate. Peer coaches told us they found themselves slipping into "supervisory, evaluative comments" despite their intentions to

avoid them. Teachers shared with us that they expect "first the good news, then the bad" because of their past experiences with clinical supervision, and admitted they often pressured their coaches to go beyond technical feedback and give them "the real scoop." To the extent that feedback was evaluative or was perceived as evaluative, it was not meeting our original intention.

Remarkably, omitting feedback in the coaching process has not depressed implementation or student growth (Joyce and Showers 1995), and the omission has greatly simplified the organization of peer coaching teams. In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand this finding. Learning to provide technical feedback required extensive training and time and was unnecessary after team members mastered new behaviors.

3. We have needed to redefine the meaning of "coach": when pairs of teachers observe each other, the one teaching is the "coach," and the one observing is the "coached." In this process, teachers who are observing do so in order to learn from their colleague. There is no discussion of the observation in the "technical feedback" sense that we used in our early studies. Generally, these observations are followed by brief conversations on the order of "Thanks for letting me watch you work. I picked up some good ideas on how to work with my students."

4. The collaborative work of peer coaching teams is much broader than observations and conferences. Many believe that the essence of the coaching transaction is to offer advice to teachers following observations. Not so. Rather, teachers learn from one another while planning instruction, developing support materials, watching one another work with students, and thinking together about the impact of their behavior on their students' learning.

Recommendations for Training Sessions

Continuing concerns drive our work: how best to help teachers teach students to build intellectual independence; reasoning and problem-solving capability; competence in handling the explosion of information and data; and, with the help of technology, the ability to navigate the information age. We believe that staff developers can assist educators by incorporating certain behaviors in their training sessions.

First, we can help schools and teams of teachers redesign their workplaces. Rather than simply advocating that schools provide time for collaborative planning and problem-solving related to specific plans for change, we can provide time during training to address this problem. Reviewing Raywid's (1993) research on finding time for collaboration is one way to begin such a session.

Second, staff can form peer coaching teams on the first day of training. When entire school faculties train together, they have many options for forming teams, and staff developers can facilitate discussion of those options. Faculties can also try out various formats, comparing costs and benefits of alternative plans. A school attempting to develop an integrated curriculum as part of its improvement plan may want to experiment with cross-subject or cross-grade teams. Schools with a focus on multicultural curriculums may want to spread faculty expertise on various cultures among the teams. However a school forms its teams, it is useful for teachers to have immediate practice in working together toward shared goals.

Third, we can provide examples of formats or structures for collaborative planning. Many teachers have shared with us their difficulty in jointly performing an activity they have traditionally done alone. A structured walk-through of a planning activity can allow teams to respond to questions within specific time frames, practice thinking aloud about what each person wants to accomplish, and identify overlap with their colleagues' agendas. A sample sequence might include the following.

- Think about your year's "course." What are your big, overarching goals for your students?

- Now think about the first six weeks of school. What objectives will you need to accomplish if you are to meet your year's goals? How much time can you spend in review and still meet your objectives?
- What instructional strategies are most appropriate for the objectives you've set for the first six weeks? Are they consistent with your year-end goals?
- Given the overlap of objectives in your team, can you divide the labor and develop materials that others can use?

Fourth, peer coaching study teams need to plan how they will monitor implementation of new initiatives, and how they will determine the impact of each initiative on their students. When whole schools agree on a specific change agenda, study teams may want to address in small groups how they will discover whether their efforts are having the desired effects, then combine their ideas in a whole-school session. Measuring the impact of planned change is critical to any school improvement effort. The training setting is optimal for planning mini-studies that teams can conduct throughout the year for this purpose.

Coaching and School Improvement

Collaborative planning and data collection increase the time, and thus the cost, of staff development activities. To the extent that such activities result in greater clarity about means and ends, more thorough implementation of planned changes, and more immediate information about effects on students, the additional effort is well worth the investment.

Adding peer coaching study teams to school improvement efforts is a substantial departure from the way schools often embark on change efforts. On the surface, it appears simple to implement—what could be more natural than teams of professional teachers working on content and skills? It is a complex innovation only because it requires a radical change in relationships among teachers, and between teachers and administrative personnel.

When staff development becomes the major vehicle for school improvement, schools should take into account both the structures and content of training, as well as changes needed in the workplace to make possible the collaborative planning, decision making, and data collection that are essential to organizational change efforts. As we ponder ways to ensure that training/coaching fuels the school renewal process, we are also examining how the culture of the school can increasingly provide a benign environment for collective activity.

A cohesive school culture makes possible the collective decisions that generate schoolwide improvement efforts. The formation of peer coaching teams produces greater faculty cohesion and focus and, in turn, facilitates more skillful shared decision making. A skillful staff development program results in a self-perpetuating process for change, as well as new knowledge and skills for teachers and increased learning for students.

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