

Peer Coaching for Improvement of Teaching and Learning

by Jean M. Becker

Introduction

This past fall, the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future published a report called: "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future." This report focused on teachers and the quality of teaching as the core of student performance. New curriculum, standards, resources/materials, assessments, methodologies, technology, and reforms will not and do not have much impact unless teachers have appropriate access, knowledge, skills and continuous learning opportunities. Teachers require time for reflection, mentoring relationships, collegial interaction, expert role models, and ongoing professional development for any of these changes to be effective.

This national report has triggered an overwhelming response, as seen in writings, at conferences, projects and grant opportunities, but most importantly in local, state and national discussions. To many education professionals there was nothing new in this report, but it provided important affirmation and meaningful data collection to support what many have been living for their whole professional lives. Another report came out this fall which also focuses on professional development of teachers: The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education's "Teachers Take Charge of Their Learning: Transforming Professional Development for Student Success." This report "asserts that continuous teacher learning is the key to helping students achieve high standards of learning and that the profession itself must take responsibility for weaving continuous learning into the fabric of the teaching job."¹

The National Commission made five major recommendations for the future of education:

1. Get serious about standards, for both students and teachers.
2. Reinvent teacher preparation and professional development.
3. Overhaul teacher recruitment and put qualified teachers in every classroom.
4. Encourage and reward teaching knowledge and skill.
5. Create schools that are organized for student and teacher success.²

An element which can be a tool to influence each of these recommendations is peer coaching. Peer coaching is a model of professional development that can be used to improve student learning by improving teaching. Peer coaching has the potential to improve existing, as well as new, teaching practices.

Issues

The improvement of teaching practices has traditionally been left to individual teachers working in isolation. Whether learning a new practice or working to improve a current practice, teachers are expected, without appropriate support, to "work it out" on their own. Currently one-shot inservices, extended classes or workshops are rarely followed up with feedback and support or continued training.

"According to Fullan, "The absence of follow-up after workshops is the greatest single problem in contemporary professional development."³

There are few vehicles and little incentives for teachers to reflect on practice, share successful practices or learn from and with colleagues. Beginning teachers, or teachers changing disciplines or grade levels rarely have a regular, reliable support system.

"After teaching for 15 years I was asked to teach Algebra for the first time. I was frustrated. I needed another set of eyes in my room to give suggestions and feedback."⁴

To improve professional practices, and consequently to improve student learning, teachers need accessible opportunities and models for collaboration, sharing of ideas, feedback and assistance with their practice so that students may have the most optimal situations for learning, achievement, and success in schools.

Components

What is peer coaching? Peer coaching is a process in which two or more professional colleagues work together for a specific, predetermined purpose in order that teaching performance can be improved as well as validated. The purpose may be to reflect on current practices or to expand, to refine, and build new skills. Peer coaching can be utilized to share new ideas; to teach one another; to conduct classroom observations; or to solve problems in the workplace. Peer coaching is non judgmental, and non evaluative. Peer coaching focuses on the collaborative development, refinement and sharing of professional knowledge and skills. "Both novice teachers and veterans...nearly universally reported that these interactions improved their teaching. All involved are enthusiastic, including principals...welcome the new strengths the program brings to their schools."⁵

There are a variety of peer coaching terms and models: technical coaching, collegial coaching, team coaching, cognitive coaching, and challenge coaching are a few of the more common types of coaching used by schools.⁶

Each model is slightly different but all have the same end goal-to improve teaching and learning-and all involve the use of peers/colleagues to achieve this goal. Choosing appropriately which model for a situation is key, as is having all models available for use.

Why Peer Coaching?

Statistical support for peer coaching comes from many sources. Perhaps the most easily understood data follows:

- 5% of learners will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory
- 10% will transfer a new skill into their practice with theory and demonstration
- 20% will transfer a new skill into their practice with theory and demonstration, and practice within the training
- 25% will transfer a new skill into their practice with theory and demonstration, and practice within the training, and feedback
- 90% will transfer a new skill into their practice with theory and demonstration, and practice within the training, feedback, and coaching

Dr. Bruce Joyce, "Staff Development Awareness Conference," Columbia, SC, January 1987.

Purposes which have been indicated to reinforce use of peer coaching include:

- increase of student learning
- facilitate/increase discussion between/among colleagues of professional topics/research
- sharing of successful practices through collaboration
- encouragement of and provisions for reflective practice
- use as a problem-solving vehicle
- reduce isolation among teachers
- promote teacher as researcher
- create a forum for addressing instructional problems
- support and assist new and beginning teachers in their practice
- build collaborative norms to enable teachers to give and receive ideas and receive assistance

A participant in STAR (Staff Training Assistance and Review Program) in Seattle, Washington offered, "...It has been a great relief and a great help to me to have time...to discuss my problems and to have her observations on my classes and my teaching...I feel much stronger now that I did... and am looking forward to further improvements."⁸ There are currently programs provided for in union contracts and state policies across the country. Some American Federation of Teachers affiliates who provide a variety of peer coaching programs for their members include Toledo, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, and Boston. The State Board of Education in Vermont provides standards for teachers that include peer coaching.

Benefits

"The level of trust we developed throughout the year made it possible for us to support and listen to one another and to adapt our instruction based on individual needs."⁹ "Having other teachers observe my classes gives me feedback on my strengths and weaknesses without having to be evaluated by an administrator."¹⁰

"The feedback has also given me insight into what is actually taking place in my classroom through another set of eyes. I feel that my effectiveness has been greatly increased through the peer coaching process."¹¹

"It brought to life a lot of things I know I should do and had tried, but had not continued. It gave me an impetus, having a colleague I respect critique my teaching."¹²

Some of the benefits reported by professionals who have been involved in peer coaching are:

- improved student achievement
- enhanced student progress
- enhanced sense of professional skill
- increased ability to analyze their own lessons
- better understanding of what we know about best practices in teaching and learning
- wider repertoire of instructional strategies/resources
- deeper sense of efficacy
- stronger professional ties with colleagues
- improved teaching performance
- a better articulated curriculum
- more cohesive school culture
- positive school climate

Support

Today there are many teams of teachers and many schools around the country using peer coaching. There have been numerous books and journal articles, as well as workshops and training devoted to peer coaching. Studies have been conducted to document the positive impact of peer coaching on student and teacher learning. Yet they are not catching on in wide scope.

Obviously, a program like this needs certain supports in place in order to be successful. Commonly mentioned criteria are:

- trusting relationships among all participants
- administrative support (emotional, organizational, financial)
- faculty/staff recognition of the need for improvement and formal ongoing learning
- clear expectations for engagement
- assessment methods for measuring the difference and outcomes for the experience
- release time for peer coaches
- funds to pay for training and personnel

Policy Recommendations

In order for peer coaching to meet the intended purposes and realize the many benefits, specific policy components need to be in place. Peer coaching must be recognized as a legitimate and useful form of ongoing professional development. Teachers need to receive release time, pay and credit to participate in a coaching program.

1. Local schools and local and state districts must include peer coaching as a vital component of their professional development programs.
2. Peer coaching must be included as a component as the state restructures its teacher certification programs, and the curriculum in teacher preparation programs is restructured.
3. Provide opportunities for teachers to form inter and intra-school teams according to individual needs.
4. Local schools and local and state districts must provide funding for training, time and personnel to include peer coaching in professional development programs.

References/Resources

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Other

American Federation of Teachers
Boston Teachers Union Contract
Minneapolis Teachers Union Contract
Standards for Vermont Educators

Footnotes

1. National Foundation for the Improvement of Education. (1996). **Teachers Take Charge of their Learning: Transforming Professional Development for Student Success.** West Haven, CT.
2. National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. (1996). **What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future.** New York.
3. Leggett, D. & Hoyle, S. (1987). Peer coaching: One district's experience using teachers as staff developers. **The Journal of Staff Development.** 8(1), p.16.
4. Griselle Gemmati, Norwood Park School, Chicago, Illinois.
5. National Foundation for the Improvement of Education. (1996). **Teachers Take Charge of their Learning: Transforming Professional Development for Student Success.** West Haven, CT.
6.
 - *technical coaching* is usually used to focus on acquiring and transferring a new teaching practice into a teacher's regular repertoire
 - the major goals of *collegial coaching* are to "refine teaching practice, deepen collegiality, increase professional dialogue" and help teachers reflect on their work.
 - *Cognitive coaching* is considered a type of collegial coaching focused on understanding and using patterns of thinking..
 - *team coaching* working in a team instead of in pairs, as are most of the other models
 - *challenge coaching* is generally used to focus on a specific problem and can be used in a larger context than the classroom (e.g. school, grade levels, dept.)
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