

Critical Peers in Context

Volume 1



Coaching to lead in the United Arab Emirates

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Staff development is an essential part of school improvement. Coaching and leading others on their quest to develop, share, engage and innovate is a vital part of the journey. The coaching summaries within this portfolio outline the commitment and dedication of the teachers involved and they clearly demonstrate that learning has taken place at all levels. They also demonstrate that teachers enjoy and benefit from sustained support from each other. Peer coaching can and should inspire teams of teachers to explore each other's practice so that learning can be reciprocated and built-upon.

The coaching episodes within this case study show that when teachers work together, they can identify challenges, find solutions and co-construct professional knowledge. This professional knowledge will be vital to sustaining success and will lead us in to the next academic year with a strong foundation to improve.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'P. Hill' followed by a stylized, horizontal flourish.

Peter Hill
Headmaster
Dubai College

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James McBlane The British School Al Khubairat

Context

I have been working with a member of the science department over a period of two terms. We have engaged in 'peer' coaching. Both of us have been working on different aspects of our teaching with the aim of strengthen and improving our practice. Our initial plan was to identify and focus in on the key area we were aiming to develop. Nicola's main aim was to focus on increasing the 'active learning experience for students

Rationale

In engaging in peer coaching we both hoped to have the opportunity to focus in on the areas we were particularly hoping to develop. We gave our sessions a clearly purpose I was looking to develop a 'thinking skills approach' and Nicola was trying to focus in on engaging students through an 'active learning approach'.

Process

Nicola and I engaged in a number of coaching sessions over a period of two terms. In total we had three individually focused sessions each. In each case we agreed the focus of the session in advance this was agreed at the end of the previous coaching session as a result of the conversation that had taken place. Each cycle of coaching followed a lesson observation – in which we had agreed what the focus was. This was important so that our sessions had a clear focus. As a non-specialist watching a Biology lesson it also helped to give clarity to the process of observing the lesson. The coaching sessions were also based around the 'evidence' of the lessons and as the coach I attempted to develop the skill and ability to prompt and get Nicola to try to reflect on her approach and also possible alternative pedagogically approaches. As we engaged in our 4th and 5th session the benefits of working together became clearer. The distinction between coach and coachee became unimportant and our conversations as a result became more honest and open. I was personally very surprised at how beneficial I found the sessions, at first I was very skeptical but having someone ask questions and getting you really thinking I found it tremendously helpful. As a result of the coaching session I not only adjusted my practice for things I was already doing but I consider and implemented new ideas. To me the benefits of 'peer coaching are clear. Once you get to a stage where you are comfortable with the coach and you feel you are not being judged it allows you to openly reflect on your own practice – it is this critical reflection that has been so useful and has genuinely led to me adopting new ideas.

Impact and Outcomes

As the coachee I feel the process has genuinely made me fully reflect on my classroom practice in an honest and full sense probably since I qualified as a teacher. Whilst I do consider and try to analyse my own practice in the classroom it is the clearly defined process that gives both structure and purpose to the process and therefore makes it both more meaningful but also more effective. Furthermore, I do feel that Nicola has also benefitted from the experience. I have seen her write up and testimony of the process and have been pleased that she feels she has developed professionally and as a practitioner from the process.



The impact of the coaching sessions for both me Nicola is that we feel that it has had a significant impact on both our own learning but also other learners. The process has helped me to develop both my own ideas but also develop ideas to model practice to others. My Action Research project and what I have been able to develop and present to other owes considerably to this process.

The outcome for me and the most important things I have learnt from the process and my recommendations to anyone thinking of or about to start coaching are; Firstly, coaching works. I will admit that I was skeptical, particularly of 'peer coaching' by a non-specialist but I have found the whole process to be very valuable, resulting in clear outcomes for me. Secondly, have a clear focus. Having a very clear structure to the sessions makes them much more effective and purposeful. Finally, try to relax and be open as the coachee and to aid this, don't judge as the coach

Liz Howard & Raj Johal Deira International School

Context

The purpose of the coaching for our team was to examine the usage of the marking stamps which were being trialed as part of our action research project on formative assessment. As there were 4 teachers taking part in the research we felt that the coaching would take on a collaborative style. Our aim was to observe the practice of our colleagues and their students and the usage of the stamps and evoke a professional dialogue about the development and learning that was taking place for themselves and the students. In time the model changed to a more specialist coaching model due to the fact that our learning goals were the same. We felt that over a very short period of time we had developed a more mutually supportive and reflective role within our coaching team with a similar approach we were all practicing together. We hoped to achieve constant reflection during the sessions, building on what we believed was successful, what we were finding challenging and how adaptations/developments could be executed.

Process

The process we followed was a culmination of observations, use of reflection of observation to inform next steps, 1 to 1 questioning to dissolve problems, support to clarify next steps the input and place of 'critical friends' to develop the process.

Due to the nature of our team dynamics it was extremely easy to be constantly feeding back and reflecting upon the process with each other. There would be times when informal dialogue created the catalyst for change. We met regularly to formally reflect on progress and in turn would decide on next steps of action. The underlining tone of all dialogue was one of complete mutual support and transparency. The dialogue was sometimes recorded and a simple word processed log was kept, we would then revisit comments or ideas to put into action. Due to the nature of the action research the most difficult part of the process was finding the time to action changes and be able to take our reflections into a more formal setting and record evidence. We felt we were constantly actioning change and reflecting on the successes and challenges with the learning and how the children were grasping the concept of the stamps and their usage in the classroom. Some unexpected effects of the coaching was the candid nature with which we could talk to each other. In a lesson where the stamps were being utilized and the objective of the lesson was to gauge their understanding of the stamps, I felt that the children had not developed a firm understanding. However when debriefing with the coach where comments from the children were examined and samples of their work were discussed it was evident that the children were developing their knowledge of the stamps and how they impact on their work. From this episode it was evident that if the coachee is feeling particularly negative, on reflection and de-brief with the coach success was evident, but only after a collaborative conversation had taken place and the coach had prompted positive reflection by using examples from the classroom to support it. In terms of the day to day practice we felt that the experience of coaching was a positive one and enabled us to move our project forward with confidence.

Impact and Outcomes

I think the most significant outcome of the coaching has been the ability to reflect at such a deep level enabling all involved to feel that the process has ensured constant collaborative change. Ideas have developed to such an extent that we have felt that the process has been constantly evolving to reveal further success for the teachers and the learners. The questioning sessions and dialogue allowed us to completely break down episodes in the classroom and uncover new feelings and thoughts about the learning taking place and the effect the action research was having on our teaching and learning. The coaching has enabled us to try new approaches, to take risks, be reflective and ensure an ever changing model of working. In a forum where trust has been at the forefront it has been a great foundation for change.



In lessons that were observed it inspired confidence to know that the coach was fully aware of the stage of the action research you were at and the due to shared dialogue had an understanding of the objectives of the lesson. Through this there was often so much more to unpick when it came to questioning and reflection part of the lesson. It seemed there was always something to scrutinize and 'unpack' resulting in more reflection and feeding forward to change and development within our practice. The nature of the roles of the coachee and the coach ensured they felt mutually rewarded and were able to move forward with a growing knowledge of the direction of the research.

Rationale

Coaching can work with great success and in this experience it has only made us more reflective as teachers but to a much deeper level. We are able to critique ourselves as well as each other in a trusting supportive setting to develop teaching and learning. The reasons why it worked well for us were due to a deep level of trust and respect for each other's growing professional knowledge.

Mark Barrington Dubai College

Context

I have spent time working with a colleague within my school but who is outside of my working team through various coaching episodes. She is a subject leader of ICT who leads an extended department that have significant additional responsibilities. We worked together in a coaching partnership to focus on the deliverance of project based learning (PBL) within her subject area. The project was being delivered in ICT and I was bringing my experience of observing and being involved in PLB both at this school (cross-curricular with MFL) and through my previous school.

I have a strong working relationship with the coachee which I believed would be paramount for the coaching process to be as effective as it could be. I would only be observing the HoD of ICT in her delivery and implementation of the PBL. We planned to have observations of the introduction lesson along with discussions both pre and post this project starting up.

Rationale

In the first instance our aim was to start in the process of breaking down some pre conceived ideas regarding coaching that seem to be held by various colleagues within the school. The institution is very much departmentalised in how it operates with little in the way of cross filtration between subject areas. This episode was hopefully for us to show the wider community of the school that with the right structure and mind set we can assist each other, irrespective of our particular subject area. We also wanted to ensure that we were in a position to be able to demonstrate the communication, listening and analytical skills required to be a successful coach. If this was shown to be the case we would be able to enable some facilitation across departments if and when the school look to bring about this practice.

Process

The first of the coaching episodes that myself and the coachee had come about somewhat inadvertently. We often have discussions if I see that she is free and I am passing by her room. We started discussing the impact of the course and how we should move forward with our coaching process (the context of it being around the implementation of PBL had already been agreed). Within 30 minutes we had spoken about experiences of PBL, what worked well and what didn't, how it could work within the context of the students at our school along with the context of the school itself. It was only on reflection when we had finished the 'discussion' did we realise that we had moved along with our first steps in the coaching process.



The benefits of this as an episode was that it was not formalised, on reflection I feel that I led and possibly forced my thoughts on the conversation a little too much instead of the coachee being able to develop her thoughts in relation to her department and subject matter and for me to just guide with leading questions. We agreed to have the informal drop in's but with the coachee taking the lead in the discussions on her work towards the implementation of the project.

The lesson observation occurred as the first lesson of the project. The aims of the observation were set by the coachee based on what she wanted to take from the experience. Aims included – engagement of students, clarity of presentation, suitable frameworks established. From the observation I feel that our previous discussions had enabled the coachee to be able to put together a learning experience that was personalised and empowered the students to make decisions. The session was not over taught, which had been a concern from the coachee, and this had come up in our discussions. Feedback on the lesson was more formal than our other episodes, being able to offer praise as a focus area along with offering areas for consideration enabled constructive discussion to ensue. The language of choice for the feedback was essential. The evidence from the impact comes from the discussions with the coachee on her confidence and ability to be able to develop the PBL through our coaching episodes.

Impact and Outcomes

I have often thought about the concept of coaching and if it is something that I have the capacity to be able to achieve. From these coaching episodes it seems that there are many areas of coaching that intuitively happen without us necessarily calling it coaching. Putting a formal outcome and framework on our usual discussions and good practice makes the impact ever greater. Enabling us to put time aside to enable this more formalised framework to materialise is one of the greater challenges.

If the process was to be completed again I would look to have a trail of what had been discussed and agreed in our conversations. Either a dictation of the conversations or some level of formalised 'minutes'. This may formalise the episode from the structure that we found the most beneficial, however it would assist us with the starting point in the next episode instead of spending time covering past points.

The most difficult aspect of the episodes related to being able to keep the conversation on track and not digress into points off task. Enabling the coachee to be able to be open and yet control the conversation to keep it on task is fundamental to gaining the most from the situation. This is a key point I would share with a colleague looking at coaching for the first time, but to also not have any overly preconceived ideas as to what should be achieved by the end of an episode.

From the coaching I have taken part in, I find the following the three most important points:

- Coaching can work across departments not just within them. The subject content is not the overarching or restrictive factor to enable coaching to be successful. Having a colleague who is open to being a coachee is the most important factor.
- Aim to keep the discussions informal in the main part as this promotes the most discussion points and is the environment that most staff naturally engage in.
- When giving any feedback to the coachee make sure that there is suitable time spent in considering the language of choice you will use to deliver the feedback. There has to be trust between coach and coachee and this is reinforced through the constructive feedback received from a coach.

Kate Greenless Dubai College

Context

Part of my role as Subject Leader for ICT is to encourage and support other members of staff to use technology in their day to day practice. After talking to a fellow Subject Leader (PE), a discussion arose on how he was looking to use ICT in order to reduce the amount of pre-practical time in lessons, thus giving his students maximum time to spend on the field or in the gym. I suggested a few ways in which ICT might be a useful resource for him in this context and we then decided to embark on a short coaching programme, where I could facilitate him in implementing a variety of new teaching techniques/resources.

The colleague in question is an extremely experienced and innovative PE teacher, so the purpose of my coaching sessions were to offer peer support and guidance in the use of ICT only. To start, we agreed that I would observe him teach a Year 9 PE lesson in order for me to have a better understanding of what he was trying to achieve. The aim was for me to then aid him in devising a plan, focusing on improving the timings of his practical lessons and for me to do a follow up observation to look at the impact that ICT had.

Rationale

The aim of my coaching sessions was simple: to provide support and guidance to a colleague and to promote the use of ICT in a cross curricular manner within the school. In return, I was hoping that through the coaching sessions, I would be able to learn from my colleague and perhaps, use some of the teaching techniques that he uses in my own classroom practice. It was important to recognise my colleagues teaching ability and personality and to ensure that I did not patronise him in any way. Having worked with each other for the past two years, I did not want to put our professional relationship in jeopardy nor affect the mutual respect that we have for one another.

Process

The first step was to observe my colleague teach a practical lesson. The session chosen was an outdoor, Year 9 Boys Softball lesson. The first fifteen minutes of the session took place in the changing rooms so I was unable to observe his 'Starter' but he did give me a copy of his lesson plan so that I could understand the nature of the instructions that he was giving to his students. The following 30 minutes were spent on the field, where the boys were split in to two groups and given more instructions on how to enforce the correct techniques for playing the sport. The final 5 minutes were a 'cool down' session on the way back to the changing rooms, where the member of staff questioned his students on what they had learnt. As someone, who has no experience in teaching PE, I was not able to comment on the effectiveness of his teaching methods, as it appeared that all students had learned something new. However, what was apparent was the lack of time spent attacking the physical nature of the sport and I could see the frustrations of both my colleague and his students.



What followed from this lesson observation was a series of short coaching sessions, ranging from 25 to 45 minutes. During these sessions I was able to ask a variety of questions to my colleague about how he felt his lessons were progressing and asking him about what he has been doing differently and what the impact of his changes had been. In return, I gave him some information about curriculum based software that might be of use to him and he researched these in more depth and decided on which would be of use to his subject area. This was usually the starting point for our discussions, although more on a subconscious level. However, it was not necessarily the formal coaching sessions that were the most effective, but more so the times when we met during the school break times when we had a quick, informal chat. I would quite often ask "How are things going?" and as a result we would have a short but succinct dialogue about something we had learnt, consequently sharing good practice on an informal level. It was during these sessions that we both mentioned using a new piece of Software called Edmodo that a different colleague of ours had recommended to us on separate occasions. This seemed to be the catalyst for improving my colleague's timings of lessons and very quickly became the main focus of our mentoring sessions from there on.

Finding sufficient time for us to explore the use of Edmodo in more detail and completing the coaching sessions in general has been a real challenge. With full teaching loads and extra-curricular activities, we inevitably had to cancel many planned sessions but wherever possible managed to meet at least once a week, even in an informal setting so that ideas were kept fresh in our minds. At the beginning of the coaching sessions, the focus was on my colleague but in retrospect, I do feel that I have benefitted from the experience just as much as he did, as it has made me question my own classroom practice on a daily basis.

Impact and Outcomes

The biggest impact of our coaching sessions has been on the students and the experience that they get in the classroom. Although the focus was initially on PE and how ICT can be used to improve the outcome of a practical lesson, I do feel that my own ICT students have benefitted from this experience just as much. Not necessarily in terms of the use of ICT in lessons but more so in 'flipping' the classroom so that students can essentially become the font of knowledge.

My colleague has been able to offer new and exciting ways teaching methods in to his lessons, reducing the amount of teacher led time spent explaining activities but essentially without affecting the quality of the student's learning and indeed enhancing the whole student experience. Some of those practices are not applicable to other subjects, such as mine, but I have been able to learn from his experiences and adapt some of his teaching methods in to my own lessons.

The coaching process itself has been a valuable experience and has taught me how to use more open ended questions in order to get others to start thinking for themselves. This is definitely something that I will be using with my students, more so on a pastoral level, when completing tracking and monitoring with my students. I do believe that we perform informal coaching sessions on a far more regular basis, without even thinking about it. I am constantly asking questions of my students but will perhaps do so now in a more structured way. Working in a small department, I recognise that coaching can be done for a variety of reasons and should be incorporated in to the professional review system. I do not feel that it has to be exclusive to a 1:1 teacher/teacher setting and actually if I were to repeat this process again, I would consider doing it with a small group of colleagues so that more ideas could be brought to the table.

In conclusion, I feel that these are the three most important findings from my coaching experience:

- Coaching is something that we do an informal level every day, be it with friends, family, students or colleagues. Understanding how different types of questioning can be used in discussion in order to get people to reflect more on their own practice is the key to success and it does not take long to see how effective this questioning can be.
- Although subject content is explicitly different, every department faces the same challenges and work towards the same goals. Sharing good practice does not need to be exclusive to those who teach closely together.
- The use of coaching should, in my opinion, be used in conjunction with a formal professional review system. Goals, no matter how simple, can be set regularly in order to get teachers to constantly reflect on their own practice and the experiences that their students have.

Richard Dennis Dubai College

Context & Rationale

I decided to carry out a series of two coaching episodes. One was a deliberate, pre-arranged and more "formal" coaching session, with Science colleague who was also following the LP programme. The other was an informal, unplanned session with History colleague, which I decided to write about as because I thought it would be interesting to see if there was much difference in outcome between the two situations.

Process

My first unplanned "coaching session" took place in the build-up to the school's inspection, and I was sharing ideas with a History colleague as to how best to deliver a lesson that was likely to be observed. We initially met for about ten minutes and had an informal discussion about lesson ideas, and what we thought might be appropriate for an observed lesson. Essentially this constituted "Peer-coaching" and we arrived at a plan to simply observe part of each other's lessons with the aim of sharing ideas on teaching strategies, as well as provoke a later discussion on preparing for the inspection.

This colleague briefly observed part of my lesson where I demonstrated my "research project" as a suggestion of what might work in an observed lesson. I later observed him teaching the same topic, to a different class and we then compared our observations on each other's lessons. It was interesting for both of us to see very different approaches in covering the same material. My lesson consisted of a "flipped lesson": the students arriving in class already knowledgeable about the topic as I had set them homework to watch a film and make notes. My colleague observed the students planning and then conducting a debate to deepen and consolidate the material that they already were familiar with. My colleagues' approach was to teach them this knowledge in the class in a more traditional way, and then set them a homework that was intended to get the students to extend their knowledge.

The coaching session/post observation discussion went smoothly and I felt it was mutually beneficial. I was able to reflect on how my lesson had gone, and it enabled me to see how my approach could be refined further. My colleague similarly identified some ways by which the lesson structure could be refined. We not only learned through this reflection, but it gave us both some ideas to try out in the near future.



Process

Although I was ostensibly functioning as Head of Dept at the time, the communication in the coaching episodes seemed to have significantly helped by us both working towards a common goal: to prepare for an impending inspection. The agreed focus of the coaching session was: What worked well, what could be improved. There was a tendency, however, to stray off this point, and we both found that there was probably too much talk about, issues such as: Adequacy of materials, Engagement of the students, Extension materials, Differentiation, Types of questioning in class, Appropriateness of homework tasks.

So, although all of the discussion was helpful, we agreed that next time we did a coaching session we should have a more narrow focus on one, perhaps two of the above points.

This informal, often unplanned form of "Coaching" continues to date (3 months later) and I find that it is an effective way to get me to reflect on what I am doing in my teaching / assessment strategies, etc, and certainly does help me to identify ways to improve what I do, and recognise what works and what doesn't. It also, I believe, has been a very effective means of establishing a climate of team-work within the department and, overall, it has helped motivate both us to try out new ideas.

The second coaching session, with a Science Colleague, had a pre-agreed focus, and therefore a greater sense of purpose.

We made an appointment, with an agreed agenda: To set up a lesson-observation with a view to observing each other's research projects. In this situation we both had very different projects. NL was experimenting with more creative group-work ideas in the classroom, to try to promote greater thinking and participation. I, on the other hand, was trying to develop ways to "Flip" the lesson, so the students would be bringing a greater degree of understanding to the classroom, and would become less reliant on me as the source of knowledge.

As well as agreeing on a format and focus for the impending observations, we were able to have a productive discussion about ideas to promote more thinking and independent learning in the classroom, as well as in homework assignments.

The first coaching session proceeded well: we simply discussed our individual projects, and outlined what we hoped they would achieve. We also described what we hoped to show in our observed lessons (later that week) and agreed on the specific areas that we wanted each other to focus and comment on. Unlike my informal first attempts at coaching with a history colleague, myself and NL introduced a greater element of formality, in that we positioned ourselves away from distractions, had a pre-agreed agenda and deliberately allowed each other time to take turns to ask questions.

During this we found a lot of common ground, and found that the rapport was easily established. Although we were equipped with coaching techniques (eg: how to establish rapport, how to stay focused, questioning technique etc) we both found that these were not required. It was very noticeable that coaching session was more focused and this gave our subsequent lesson observations a greater sense of specific purpose.

Process

The observations went well, in so far as we did succeed in observing different lesson ideas, which provided plenty of material to discuss in the follow-up coaching session. At this (second) session we really were able to model a more structured coaching episode, with both of us taking turns to ask questions, use prompt questions and promote some effective thinking. We then followed up this cycle of observation and discussion by sending brief emails to clarify what we had discussed and learned from the experience, and then set about trying to modify our teaching ideas in light of what the episode had revealed.

Subsequent coaching session the discussed our progress and the extent to which we had modified our ideas in class, and then shared our findings with other members of the LP programme, both at DC as well as BSAK, via an online message board. My self and NL also conducted later, briefer sessions where we discussed other teaching issues relating to the mutual challenge of teaching younger students (in her form class). Again, we found our discussions to be productive and they were recorded via email.

Impact and Outcomes

What I achieved in both coaching episodes was effective largely (in my view) due to a positive working relationship already having been established. Further investigation would be interesting to see if a similar level of success and effective communication could be established so early on when attempting to coach an unfamiliar colleague or someone from outside my normal working environment.

Overall, I believe coaching is very effective tool, both planned and unplanned, and I am beginning to use it more frequently, especially at this point in the year, where my colleagues and I are planning for next year's courses. Coaching has helped me to develop new ideas for teaching, but it has also tested and developed my communication skills, especially listening skills. I recognise that setting up a rapport, to facilitate effective communication works best when there is an agreed purpose, but where it is also conducted on informal basis, and where both parties have a sense of common purpose, of working together to find a solution, rather than it being conducted in a superior/subordinate relationship.

Although it is fairly early to reflect on how this coaching has impacted my teaching, and the student's learning, I do feel that it has encouraged me to reflect more thoughtfully, and it has certainly provoked me to work more collaboratively than I would normally have done.

To conclude, the three most important findings from the coaching I have engaged in thus far are:

- It happens more often, and in a spontaneous way more often than id realised, but it tends to be unfocused and often has less impact in this way.
- Coaching does work best when planned, or at least arranged in advance, to ensure that proper time is set aside and an agenda is set.
- It can be a powerful tool to help me reflect on what I've done/am doing and so really can help with planning ahead and solving problems.

Natalie Li Fook Dubai College

Context

The peer coaching episodes were completed outside of the Science and Biology department with another member of staff on the Leading Practitioners course and also across schools. The colleague was from the History department. The coaching episodes enabled more thinking and approaches towards our individual research projects. It was useful to bring together skills from a completed Consultant Leadership course in my previous school and what we have acquired during the LP course.

Rationale

The idea behind the coaching episodes was to aid progress in our research projects. It was a formal setting for us to discuss the issues arising and helped us formalize strategies to move forward. Practicing and setting up these types of episodes are important for long term progression not only for members of the LP course, but also as a useful format for other members of staff within the school. It is transferable across subjects and members of staff, and would be a useful tool for staff development, progress and would also help student's development of independent work. It is useful in developing and understanding the needs of staff and students.



Process

It was evident to both myself and my colleague that we had been coaching each other in a non-formal way over an ongoing process during lunch, breaks etc, as we would often discuss our LP research projects. After our LP sessions we started to make time for formal coaching sessions, albeit sometimes difficult with teaching and exam commitments.

We started by observing each other teach. Our aim was to see our research projects in action in the classroom. This was difficult to achieve initially due to our timetables, however we did manage to observe each other doing other activities and also saw each other's students doing some activities associated with our research projects.

After our observations our next step was to develop our coaching practice and this was done through email communication and using formal sessions. We managed our time effectively by using email to communicate and this gave us more scope for discussion during the time we actually were able to meet formally for our coaching episodes.

When we met we would take it in turns to be the coachee and the coach. I was aware of using open ended questions and actively listened to my colleague. Our coaching sessions began to develop through questions led by myself or my colleague when we were in the role of coach. Our questions prompted the coachee to discuss the lesson and the research project in more detail. We started by focusing just on the observation. We quickly were able to develop the coaching practice further as we had spoken informally previously. We focused on open ended questioning and discussed the impact on student learning, and how we could overcome problems we were facing with students or activities. We were able to work together to develop ideas, and again coach each other to see the impact on our teaching and the students learning. We also were able to discuss and coach each other on issues occurring within our roles in school.

I feel that the ongoing coaching episodes are very useful in developing ideas and thinking about the wider context. It is a useful cyclic tool as the different levels of coaching practice were used again and again in the step by step format. The coaching sessions really do make you reflect on your own and others teaching practices and therefore have been very transferable to classroom teaching styles.

Impact and Outcomes

I realised that my colleague and I participate in informal coaching sessions regularly. However formalizing the sessions meant that we were able to put time aside to discuss the teaching and learning topics in more detail, and at depth. Using coaching levels, criteria, open ended questions and actively listening without disruption enabled the coaching session to be much more productive. The most important impact of the coaching was that we were able to develop and progress further with the research projects. It enabled us to develop ideas, problem solve, and look at the impact on learning. I was able to consider more aspects of the project, tailor it to specific classes, and consider different ways of measuring learning through the project. It was also very useful discussing how the students perceive learning and their attitude towards the project.

Through coaching I have been able to develop more active listening skills, and have formalised coaching strategies. It has also made me reflect on my own teaching more. Besides finding the time, the most difficult aspect of the coaching was sticking to deadlines. Teachers can get overwhelmed at times of the year, and certain jobs sometimes get priority over others. If I was to repeat this process I would start it earlier in the year, so there is more time for development. I would also recommend initially focusing on a small topic to get used to the coaching before setting targets for larger more time consuming projects.

The three most important findings:

- Formalising the coaching into actual sessions gives better outcomes and therefore has a better impact on teaching practice, delivery and learning. Formalising coaching gives a setting to discuss teaching and learning without disruption from other aspects of the teaching day, as the pair would set time up to specifically discuss topics. It also helps to set formal targets and outcomes using time frames relevant to the individuals involved.
- I did these coaching episodes with a colleague that I speak to regularly. However it can also be done with colleagues across the school that you don't have regular contact with. I believe that teacher responsibility is irrelevant in a coaching partnership. The only prerequisite is that both individuals are able to communicate with each other, and want to progress and develop.
- It is also very transferable across and within departments, and to other roles and responsibilities within different organisations. Coaching is not only useful for teacher development and learning impact but also for student impact and learning. Students can become more aware of their learning and reflect on how they learn and what makes a good learner.

Rob Ashby Dubai College

Context

Quite quickly in the process of research I decided to look into promoting reflective learning amongst my A-Level students. A colleague in Art was also completing similar research (albeit from a slightly different perspective), so we decided that coaching each other would allow us to benefit from one another's experiences and explorations.

We have both attended a course on coaching which allowed us to feel confident in our ability to collaborate. The fact that we have a similar degree of experience in coaching would, we felt, enrich the process and ensure a consistent approach.

Our plan was to complete a cycle of research followed by a lesson observation and coaching sessions, the idea being that the observation would give us maximum information for appropriate questions and the coaching session would then aid us with where to focus the next cycle of research.

Rationale

Our main goal when embarking on coaching was to create a platform on which to build our research. We both find verbalising and discussing ideas to be the most beneficial way of improving our classroom practice. With this in mind, coaching would provide the quickest and most effective means of seeing successful outcomes. Our second, longer term goal was to see coaching being implemented on a school wide basis. Although this second goal is much more difficult to achieve, coaching is now widely recognised and used throughout the working world, in order to overcome problems by finding practical and worthwhile solutions. If my colleague and I could start by coaching one other and then branch out into the school, modelling the process to other colleagues, it could not only improve our own practice but we would also gain a valuable insight into other areas of the school and the curriculum. As such communication would be hugely improved between different departments allowing us to learn more effectively from one other.

Process

During the first coaching session we split the time so we could both assume the role of coach and coachee. While the role of coachee was natural and comfortable, due to the fact that we were both used to talking to each other about our teaching practise, the role of coach took a little time to get used to. Thinking carefully about how to phrase questions without making suggestions or giving advice was anything but natural. Once we got into the right mind-set the conversation started to flow but still not as freely as it would normally. Reflecting on this we could see that rather than make suggestions we adapted to asking leading questions which was something we would need to work on in future sessions. Having said this, we both felt that the session was a successful start to the coaching process and something to build on. We spent 20 minutes feeding back in which we consolidated what we had discussed, and both left with a clear idea of what we wanted to develop in our next cycle. We also produced minutes to evidence what we had done.

Our next session was completed after reading up on our coaching notes and receiving some more information from the Lead Practitioner course. The re-cap on this information was extremely useful as it revealed that our “normal” conversation, about education, was actually fairly close to being co-constructive coaching. This then allowed the next coaching session to become much more relaxed as we decided not to split the time up into coaching and coachee but complete both at once. As our projects are similar this was an extremely successful approach. Ideas started to flow and each idea prompted a new response. It was by no means perfect and we still would sometimes make suggestions to each other but we also made notes of the good questions that were asked. It was during this coaching session that the idea of peer coaching in Maths (albeit on a simpler level) could be an effective tool to helping the students’ pin-point their weaknesses. Ultimately, we both felt that the coaching experience aided us to find potential solutions and provided areas to focus on in following lessons.

Impact and Outcomes

It is interesting to reflect on the coaching experience, as the coaching sessions between my colleague and I now resemble more of the discussions we had before introducing formal coaching. Having said this we have needed to make tweaks in order to make the process more refined and also to keep to the task at hand – we would define targets at the beginning of a session in order to avoid digression. I feel much more confident in what coaching actually is and as such I feel that my colleague and I have been able to ask questions of each other that bring out and challenge areas that need improvement, while at all times remaining open to necessary change. I believe our friendship has been a great aid in this success.

The coaching has helped us both to reflect on our teaching practice and we have produced new ideas in order to help improve the learning experience of our students. As an example, while observing my colleague's year 11 class, I have seen a vast increase in their ability to engage with independent thinking. They are now much more confident when approaching new topics, to mind map new ideas without relying on others, and they have recognised their own improvements. Also, as a result of coaching, I involved my year 13 group in my research and the dialogue held with them about what works and what doesn't has made a huge difference to their learning. They are much more willing to reflect on their learning when they feel that they have ownership over it.

While co-constructive coaching is probably at its best when working with someone you know well and feel comfortable with (as was the case in this instance), it also has the opportunity to establish and improve more positive working relationships across the staff as a whole. Moving forward I feel it is important to, as mentioned before, branch out into coaching with other colleagues in different departments. This, however, has the potential to be more difficult due to the fact that not many people have had experience with coaching. A more formal and structured setting would need to be developed, while still remaining as relaxed as possible and it would also be essential that the teacher was a willing participant. Ultimately, the goal of coaching is to take time to reflect on your practice and to help both develop and improve what you do in the classroom – this is essential for a new coachee to focus on when first embarking on the coaching process. I therefore feel that branching out in this way could not only have a significant impact on myself, but also the whole school community.

I have learnt a lot from this coaching experience and would recommend coaching as an extremely useful tool in action research. My main findings have been:

- Action research and coaching are two things that I already do, I just don't necessarily formalise them. It doesn't take much effort to tweak your normal conversations with colleagues in order for it to become a useful tool in helping to improve practise. Using an outline and setting a few initial targets can be enough.
- Even though different departments tend to be isolated within a school, coaching outside of your subject area can be of great use. We often share similar problems across departments but from a slightly different perspective. Coaching in this way can help change our perspective and start to see answers were we previously did not.
- I would like to explore and look into using coaching with my A-Level groups to really get them exploring the depth of their understanding.

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Context

Initially I began coaching with a friend and colleague in order to help develop a more clearly defined strategy for promoting independent, student-led learning in my art classroom. My colleague and I had both, independently, attended a two day CPD course in coaching, and had been keen to make use of what we had learned. As we were both trying to achieve similar things in our classrooms (albeit he in the mathematics department, and I in Art), it seemed an excellent idea to coach each other; our existing relationship being one of friendship and trust being a key factor in having successful coaching experiences.

To get started, we observed each other at a point early in our research on independent learning and thinking, and after a few days to gather our thoughts got together and had a coaching session to eke out what we felt had been successful and what the next stages of the process would be for us.

Rationale

When we first began coaching, our hopes for the process of were two-fold: firstly we aimed to clarify our own practise within a specifically self-defined research project, and offer each other support with this. Secondly we were keen to develop the habit of coaching so that we might be able to use it with specific issues that might arise in the future and then help to disseminate the practice first through our close friendship-colleague group, and eventually help it become ingrained in best practise throughout our school. A utopian vision perhaps, but given time and the development of listening and questioning skills; communication, reflection and ultimately a collective understanding of successful educational approaches should increase and the institution become a more effective and empathetic place.

Process

In our first coaching session together, my colleague and I opted to use a one hour session, split to allow us to spend twenty minutes as coach, twenty minutes as coachee and twenty minutes for feedback. The coaching sessions were quite successful, but each of us spent our time as coach repressing our natural instincts to give advice, and more than a little time inadvertently injecting a few leading questions to help the coachee reach the point we felt they should be getting to. That said, we finished these sessions with a new sense of purpose and direction for our research projects. The most beneficial outcome of this initial coaching episode, however, was the feedback session. The moment we weren't 'formally coaching' we relaxed and chatted about how we had tried to avoid leading each other and felt we were able to suggest things that we had thought might be good ideas for the other's research project and discuss them without feeling like we were mentoring rather than coaching. Much of this discussion actually made it into our 'next steps' for our research projects, but we didn't initially acknowledge it as the most successful part of the session.

In fact, it wasn't until the next meeting of our Lead Practitioner group, where we discussed the different levels of coaching, that it began to dawn on us that because over the last four years of working together we regularly and without pressure had spent time at break or lunch (or perhaps more geekily, over dinner or at the pub) discussing our ideas, teaching, classroom environment and the needs of particular classes or individual students, that we had already been informally coaching each other for some time. Now obviously there is more to the process than just having a chat and taking notes, and we each acknowledged that our coaching would need a framework and specific goals for each session, it was at this point that we realised we could loosen up a bit in the sessions themselves. We still split the sessions into two so that we can feel we are helping each other, and we are increasingly open about the process we are undergoing – 'nice open question – yes, I think I can elaborate on that...'

Finding the time has been difficult, and there is always something that takes priority over these sessions, but we are attempting to make them as regular and habitual as possible, because the more we do them the more productive they get.

One of the next steps that emerged from our peer to peer coaching sessions as an action point for our research into independent thinking and learning was that coaching could greatly benefit our students. We have since begun to put this into practise within our classroom environments and have had some success; each of us perceiving personally, and through our observations of each other, an increase in group cohesion – there is more work and ideas related chatter – and students who used to ask 'what should I do now' are increasingly asking 'I am thinking of doing this, should I?' which is a step in the right direction.

Impact and Outcomes

As I have touched on briefly above, there have been several significant benefits that have come out of a serious engagement with the process of coaching. Importantly, a better understanding of the process itself; if one has a conversational and close friendship with a colleague this doesn't have to change once the formal process has begun – it can be used to great advantage. Preparing for these sessions, and writing up the 'minutes' afterwards have forced me to take the time to reflect on my goals with specific classes, individuals and in a wider pastoral context. I have gained a greater understanding of the differences and, notably, the similarities between the needs of students and teachers working in the art department and those in the Maths department, and have found that there is an important place for coaching (both specialist and peer to peer) within my teaching environment.

As our coaching sessions continue and develop, my colleague and I do need to occasionally work hard to avoid complacency; digressions into chit-chat have to be curtailed, and we are increasingly formalising the goals or targets that we lay out at the beginning of each session. In the coming months we are intending to begin coaching relationships with others – starting with those who we already have close social bonds with. These colleagues, however, have no experience of coaching, so initial sessions will require instruction and a greater formality than I am currently used to. That said, while setting goals I would like to encourage my new coachees to not feel any pressure to fulfill them – just to reflect on them during the session; as I feel that a more relaxed approach can help to develop more free-wheeling, associative thought processes and cognitive creativity.

The same can be true of what takes place within the classroom. In tutorials I have begun to use specialist to peer coaching as a method of helping my older students to develop their own ideas (rather than adapting ideas I have given them in the past), and while there is a formal framework, the discussion is relaxed and as un-pressured as it can be with looming deadlines. Peer to peer coaching is something I am trying to implement from KS3 upward both in formal sessions with crib sheets and informally by encouraging students to increase the 'work-based' aspects of their regular conversations and to feel that they can ask each other for help as well as asking the teacher.

To conclude, the three most important findings from the coaching I have engaged in thus far are:

- If you have a trusted friend and colleague with whom you have been working for a few years and 'talk about school' to quite frequently (most of us have), then you already coach (and act as coachee) on an informal level. Learning questioning techniques, setting goals and noting key outcomes and 'next steps' are all you need to turn that chat into a really beneficial part of your reflective practice.
- Despite the apparent differences between departments within a school, there are similar challenges to face and strategies that can be implemented to optimize teaching and learning within these different environments. Only through real reflective communication with colleagues from other specialisms can we share best practice and create an atmosphere of mutual support.
- Coaching between students in formalised conditions can be very successful, but it already happens more than we (or, crucially, they) think. Friends always ask each other for advice or help with homework and discuss what they are reading in English or what work they are producing in art. If we can encourage this dialogue and add a framework to it we will be one step closer to having a reflective, communicative and student driven school.

