

COACHING

APPROACHES & PERSPECTIVES

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What coaching offers is authentic learning that provides differentiated support for professional learning. Coaching is not a quick fix; it is an approach that offers time and support for teachers to reflect, converse about, explore, and practice new ways of thinking about and doing this remarkably important and complex act, called *teaching*. Perhaps most importantly, coaching puts teachers' needs at the heart of professional learning by individualizing their learning and by positioning teachers as professionals.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Although many schools and districts have been quick to recognize the potential effectiveness of coaching, leaders have understandably been less clear on what kind of coaching they are actually adopting. Today, schools employ instructional coaches, or cognitive coaches, or leadership coaches, or differentiated coaches, or reading or literacy coaches, or data coaches, or math coaches, or content coaches, to name a few. As my friend and colleague Candace Bixler (personal communication, March 16, 2008), a leader of professional developers in Austin, Texas, has commented, "What we are doing right now in education is like bringing together successful coaches from varied sports, basketball, gymnastics, football, tennis, and swimming, to develop a winning team when we haven't even determined the sport or the playing field." With so many different approaches, leaders are excused if they are just a little confused about what coaching is and what coaching offers their school, teachers, and students.

This book has been created to, we hope, undo some of the confusion. The authors are among the leaders in the field of coaching, and their mandate has been to present an overview of their ideas about a particular approach to coaching or their thoughts on what coaching is and what it can be. The book does not and could not paint a complete picture. The chapters have been written by authors who have published at least one book that more fully describes the ideas they summarize, and so the overviews and think-pieces cannot fully capture the theory and practice of each approach. However, this book is a starting point. We hope the book helps readers better understand coaching's potential so that they will be able to make better decisions about what kind of coaching best fits their schools', teachers', and students' needs.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK?

Each chapter in this book can be read by itself or in the sequence in which it occurs. Readers shouldn't hesitate to jump around to find the chapters that are most useful, reading the chapters in the sequence that works best for them. The following is a brief summary of the purpose and ideas of each chapter.

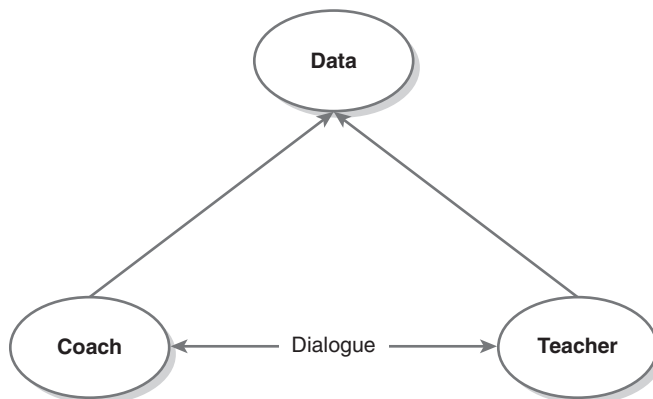
Table 1.4 Beliefs and Possible Side Effects

| <i>Belief</i> | <i>Side Effects</i> |
|---|--|
| 1. Being accepted gives me more leverage to work with teachers. | Working on being accepted may delay conversations on what matters most—teaching and learning. |
| 2. Being viewed as credible is essential to being a coach. | Credibility emerges from the alignment between one's actions and one's words. Acting on what matters immediately builds credibility. |
| 3. The work of coaches is to support teachers. | Saying that a coach's role is to support teachers misleads teachers. A coach's primary responsibility is to improve student learning. |
| 4. Teachers are resistant to change. | As professionals, teachers seek continuous improvement. Teachers are motivated to change when they see proven results in terms of student success. When that success can be evident in their own classrooms, they become change enthusiasts. |
| 5. Coaches can't impose on teachers since they have no supervisory responsibilities. | Coaches can't afford not to impose on what teachers believe and how that impacts their actions. Their work is too important, and without conversations about beliefs, deep change is unlikely. |
| 6. Helping teachers to know <i>about</i> or learn <i>how</i> to implement new instructional strategies is a coach's primary responsibility. | Coaches' primary responsibility is student learning often mediated by teachers' application of effective practices rather than knowing <i>about</i> or knowing <i>how</i> to use those practices. |
| 7. Coaches are not responsible for what teachers do. | Coaches are responsible for helping teachers explore the beliefs that drive their actions. In dialogue, through reflective questioning, and by presenting data, coaches can influence what a teacher thinks and does. |

- No teacher ever faces an instructional challenge alone.
- Every school community engages in ongoing, ruthless analysis of data, and continuous cycles of improvement that allow its members to measure results in a matter of weeks, not months or years.

Coaches support teachers as they work together to grapple with problems of practice and to make smarter, collaborative decisions that are

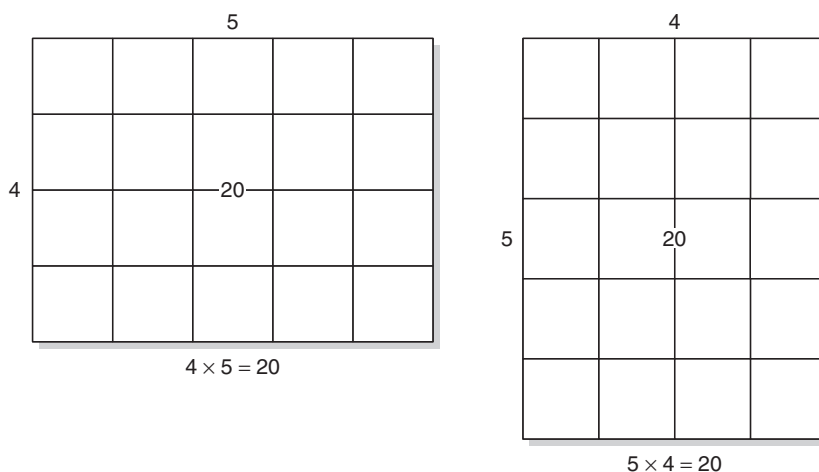
Figure 2.2 Collaborative Exploration of Data



direct, specific feedback. Direct comments are spoken to a person in the first person, not about a person in the third person. Thus, it is preferable to tell someone directly, “I appreciate your help,” rather than saying publicly, “I appreciate Jean’s help.” Specific comments clearly explain the details of what we are praising, rather than offering general statements. Thus, it is preferable to say, “You asked 42 questions today during your class,” in contrast to “You asked a lot of questions today in your class.”

The importance of making nonattributive comments may be less obvious. Kegan and Lahey (2001) explain that our positive comments about others are more effective when we describe our experience of others rather than the attributes of others. For example, it is less effective to say to someone, “You’re very patient” (describing an attribute that we judge them to have), than it is to say, “You waited 10 seconds for Alison to give her answer, and when she got it right, she lit up like a Christmas tree.” Kegan and Lahey (2001) explain why nonattribute feedback is more effective:

It may seem odd to you that we’re urging you not to make statements of this sort: “Carlos, I just want you to know how much I appreciate how generous you are” (or: “what a good sense of humor you have” or “that you always know the right thing to say”), or “Alice, you are so patient” (or, “so prompt,” “so never-say-die,” “always there when you are needed,”), and so on. . . . These seem like such nice things to say to someone. . . . The problem we see is this: the person, inevitably and quite properly, relates what you say to how she knows herself to be. You can tell Carlos he is generous, but he knows how generous he actually is. You can tell Alice she is very patient, but she knows her side of how patient she is being with you. (p. 99)



CORE ISSUES OF LESSON DESIGN

The questions a content coach asks center around a set of research-identified core issues of lesson design (see Figure 6.4). When these issues are routinely and adequately addressed in lesson planning, the result is not only lessons that promote greater student understanding, but also development of robust habits of planning among practitioners, habits that naturally lead to the capacity to differentiate a lesson to meet the needs of a range of students, habits that question why something is taught in a particular sequence and at a particular pace, habits that seek out evidence of student understanding or lack thereof and that lead to the development of diagnostic and intervention strategies to assist student learning. When mindful lesson design is practiced systemically, everyone gets smarter.

These overarching issues have been turned into “guiding questions” in our main planning tool, the Guide to Core Issues in Lesson Design (see discussion that follows).

Figure 6.4 Abbreviated List of Core Issues in Lesson Design

-
- Lesson goals
 - Lesson plan and design
 - Students' relevant prior knowledge
 - Relationship between the nature of the task and the activity on one hand and the lesson goals on the other hand
 - Strategies for students to make public their thinking and understanding
 - Evidence of students' understanding and learning
 - Students' difficulties, confusions, and misconceptions
 - Ways to encourage collaboration in an atmosphere of mutual respect
 - Strategies to foster relevant student discussion
-

SOURCE: West & Staub (2003).

Figure 6.5 Guide to Core Issues in Lesson Design—Mathematics

What are the goals and the overall plan of the lesson?

- What is your plan?
- Where in your plan would you like some assistance?

(Based on the teacher's response, the coach makes tentative choices about which of the following ideas to focus on.)

What is the mathematics in this lesson? (i.e., make the lesson goals explicit)

- What is the specific mathematics goal of this lesson?
- What are the mathematics concepts?
- Are there specific strategies being developed? Explain.
- What is the skill (applications, practice) being taught in this lesson?
- What tools are needed (e.g., calculators, rulers, protractors, pattern blocks, cubes)?

Where does this lesson fall in this unit and why? (i.e., clarify the relationship between the lesson, the curriculum, and the standards)

- Do any of these concepts or skills get addressed at other points in the unit?
- Which goal is your priority for this lesson?
- What does this lesson have to do with the concept you have identified as your goal?
- Which standards does this particular lesson address?

What are students' prior knowledge and difficulties?

- What relevant concepts have already been explored with this class?
- What strategies does this lesson build on?
- What relevant contexts (money, for example) could you draw on in relation to this concept?
- What can you identify or predict students may find difficult or confusing or have misconceptions about?
- What ideas might students begin to express and what language might they use?

How does the lesson help students reach the goals? (i.e., think through the implementation of the lesson)

- What grouping structure will you use and why?
- What opening question do you have in mind?
- How do you plan to present the tasks or problems?
- What model, manipulative, or visual will you use?
- What activities will move students toward the stated goals?
- How does this lesson engage students in thinking and activities that move them toward the stated goals?
- In what ways will students make their mathematical thinking and understanding public?
- What will the students say or do that will demonstrate their learning?
- How will you ensure that students are talking and listening to each other about important mathematics in an atmosphere of mutual respect?
- How will you ensure that ideas that are being grappled with will be highlighted and clarified?
- How do you plan to assist those students whom you predict will have difficulties?
- What extensions or challenges will you provide for students who are ready for them?
- How much time do you predict will be needed for each part of the lesson?

SOURCE: West & Staub (2003).

Answers tend to be too general (multiplication), too narrow (memorizing facts), or nonexistent (a workbook page from the text). This scenario might play out similarly in a literacy class. The question, "What are you teaching today?" might be answered with, "writing" or "essay writing,"