



Pam Robbins

Peer Coaching

to Enrich Professional Practice,
School Culture, and
Student Learning

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Introduction

While the world we live in is becoming ever more diverse, the common ground that connects all educators is an unwavering quest to improve professional practice in a way that enhances student performance. The specific names of programs may differ, but they focus on common topics: accountability; teacher evaluation; learning communities; data-driven decision making; science, technology, and engineering; arts; mathematics innovations; global education; differentiated instruction; 21st century learning skills; and school improvement. Each program has a laserlike focus on improving the depth of knowledge, skillfulness, resourcefulness, and inspiration of students and of those who educate them.

However, to quote Abraham Lincoln, “the situation is piled high with difficulty.” As Linda Darling-Hammond (2013) explains, “Achieving these [reform-related] goals will require a transformation in teaching, learning, and assessment so that all students develop the deeper learning competencies that are necessary for post-secondary success.” She emphasizes that addressing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other initiatives related to enhancing student performance will require even greater collaboration in schools, adding, “professionals benefit from connecting with dedicated colleagues to improve practice. What is surprising, even alarming, is how rarely collaborative activities that are essential for improving outcomes are supported by our schools.” Reflecting on the roots of reform, Darling-Hammond notes, “The reform impulse that gave rise to the construction of new learning

standards and assessments will only work if we invest in the capacity of educators to work together effectively." Peer Coaching provides the structures and processes to accomplish these important ends.

Much has changed in education since I wrote *How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program* (Robbins, 1991b). Classrooms have become more diverse, rich with many cultures and languages; the use of technology has advanced, with more tech-savvy professionals in our classrooms and schools; more is known about the science of teaching and learning—cognitive research, with its implications for practice, is more accessible; there is greater attention to the need to embed social and emotional learning into schools, given students' exposure to violence through social media, the news, and, sadly, even in their neighborhoods; there is greater emphasis on the need to differentiate learning experiences; there are national and international conversations about what students need to know and be able to do to thrive; many schools have expanded the value and use of teacher leadership; online resources for professional learning abound; and many schools have begun to realize the promise of operating as learning-focused, collaborative communities.

Nonetheless, many things in classrooms and schools have remained the same. Frequently, teachers still operate in isolation. In the privacy of their classrooms, these teachers often feel uncertain and have questions about practice, the curriculum, assessment, grading, and initiatives. Even if a school is moving toward collaborative work, years of isolation make some teachers tentative about getting involved. They wonder, "How do I measure up to other professionals in our school?" Or, feeling overwhelmed about all that they must do, they ponder, "Is it worth the investment of time?" Further, although advances in technology have enriched classroom learning environments, some teachers speak about how technology has precipitated isolation. As one teacher reflected,

When we have a question, we can just Google it; when we need to talk to a colleague, we text or e-mail. It's so easy to use technology, and it helps us conserve time. As a consequence, we now

have fewer face-to-face forums and converse less about our practice and our students. We must remind ourselves of the value of our interactions, break out of isolation, and create time for connecting with one another.

As educators, we feel a sense of urgency to prepare our students to thrive. We have initiatives, research, and promising practices that illuminate the direction we must go to ensure that we accomplish this. However, context variables such as norms of isolation and lists of pressing demands make it difficult to focus daily attention on these. Ironically, these obstacles can actually be used as leverage points to begin the conversation about using professional collaboration to enhance the quality of learning experiences that students encounter.

Peer Coaching provides two types of structures for interactions—*collaborative work* and *formal coaching*—that can be implemented to address challenging initiatives, enact promising practices, and research informed strategies to build teachers' capacity to help every student to excel. When a school's culture includes a tradition of isolation and staff members are not yet comfortable with publicly sharing their craft knowledge, collaborative work offers several structures wherein teachers can collaborate without a classroom observation. These interactions can focus on topics of interest, such as the integrated use of technology in the curriculum. When trust, time, training, and tangible support for formal coaching exist, then peers can engage in a pre-conference, a classroom observation of a lesson, and a post-conference focused on teaching practices that enhance student learning.

Peer Coaching is a flexible strategy that can complement the implementation of pressing initiatives that aim to improve the quality of teaching and learning and professional and academic performance. Educators in one highly regarded school system, for example, have embraced Peer Coaching as a way to augment the quality and quantity of feedback to teachers about their instruction and its effect on student learning. Another district is using Peer Coaching to enhance the effectiveness of the implementation of CCSS; and yet another is using it to

support the schoolwide implementation of *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). As these examples illustrate, Peer Coaching can leverage efforts to improve practice and performance in a variety of environments. Research suggests that in schools where teachers collaborate, academic achievement is four times more likely to improve than in schools where teachers work in isolation (Ann Lewis, quoted by Mike Schmoker, 2004). Well-functioning professional learning communities are experiencing these gains, often citing Peer Coaching as a valuable structure to promote learning-focused cultures of practice and teacher leadership, to articulate and integrate the curriculum, and to increase the use of promising practices across schools in order to meet the needs of every student.

Technology can enhance the Peer Coaching process, making it possible for individual teachers to see themselves teaching, as well as observe other exemplary teachers, even though release time may be scarce. For example, the Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching Project used technology so that teachers could observe themselves and others practicing their craft, asking challenging questions, and demonstrating multiple ways of explaining complex ideas. Teachers who had enhanced student outcomes reported that the videos, surveys, diagnostic tools, coaching, and collegial dialogue had a direct relationship to the results they achieved in the classroom. In addition, many teachers who are "flipping their classrooms"—for example, asking students to view video lectures at home so that more classroom time can be spent on discussion, questions, and projects—find Peer Coaching a helpful tool to compare and contrast their practices with those of other professionals. Digital cameras, Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, Instagram, Skype, and blogs also add variety and value to opportunities to engage in dialogue about instructional practices and their effect on staff and student learning.

The movement toward greater accountability, with its emphasis on linking teacher evaluation to improved student achievement, is a noble one. However, many teacher evaluation efforts focus on assessing the presence or absence of desirable instructional or professional behaviors

but fail to provide the support to develop these behaviors when they are ineffective or lacking. Peer Coaching offers a nonevaluative, differentiated, professional development support strategy so that teacher colleagues can plan lessons together; reflect together; have important discussions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment; observe lessons; and converse about the quality of assignments and student work; all with the goal of developing exemplary practices that leave their mark on staff and student learning. In other words, Peer Coaching represents the missing component in many efforts to enhance professional practice. It is a viable structure for job-embedded learning.

Using Peer Coaching structures to address important initiatives and enrich collegial interactions can foster meaningful, personalized professional growth for staff, magnify the influence of exemplary teaching, and augment the collective capacity of schools to provide responsive, high-quality learning experiences so that every student succeeds.

The chapters that follow will reveal what Peer Coaching is, how it works, and the critical role it can play in schools and other organizations to enhance professional practice and learning. The book will highlight key ingredients of successful Peer Coaching, identify possible pitfalls to be aware of when implementing it, and explain essential “how-to’s” so that coaching work in literacy, math, science, social studies, and other areas can have a positive effect on classroom teaching and generate student learning.

The content of this book is rooted in both research and exemplary practices. It offers practical suggestions about how to get started; how to prepare the culture of the school; logistical considerations; coaching guidelines; considerations for communication (including difficult conversations); observation and conferencing strategies; the fit between coaching, mentoring, evaluation work, and other initiatives; and suggestions for professional development. It offers specific recommendations regarding how coaching can become an integral part of efforts to enhance learning and increase collaboration in schools, while building capacity and boosting morale. Throughout the chapters the voices of teachers and coaches will offer sage advice about implementing and

supporting Peer Coaching efforts. At the end of each chapter is a set of reflective questions designed to deepen a reader's learning and to generate ideas for implementing the chapter's concepts in any workplace.

May the pages that follow offer guidance and inspiration that culminate in collaboration and learning!

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Establishing the Need for Peer Coaching

Peer Coaching is a great tool for colleagues to use to help sharpen each other's skills. It is a way to get teachers out of the isolation of their classrooms and to really benefit from observing their colleagues in action. Not only does the process help the teacher being observed, but it also gives you a chance to learn a new style of teaching or to reinforce what you do with your students.

—Alison Howells, Spanish Teacher
Lower School, Sewickley Academy

Day in and day out, dedicated teachers work tirelessly in individual classrooms, many of them unassisted by coteachers or other professionals, focused on making a difference in the academic achievement and social-emotional learning of every child. More often than not, their students represent a wide array of learning differences in terms of skills, content knowledge, background experiences, interests, parental support, learning challenges, and self-confidence. They come from a variety of cultures and consequently view and speak about the world differently. Each one is trying to find his or her unique place in the world, and in school. Isolated in their classrooms, teachers often wonder, Did I use the best lesson strategy today to teach this standard? How would my colleague across the hall do it?

At the same time, most of the schools where these classrooms are located are reeling with changes in response to local, state, or federal initiatives, all with the expressed intent of enhancing teaching and

learning: accountability, teacher evaluation, Common Core or state standards or benchmarks for performance, 21st century skills, preparing students to be college or career ready, new technologies, school improvement. The list is daunting. Within those same schools, principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders find themselves juggling these multiple initiatives while sensing the new classroom demands teachers are experiencing as a consequence. They want to support the work of individual teachers, yet they come up short when it comes to time. One suburban New Jersey principal shared this reflection:

I am very much aware of the initiatives that face us. This reality is juxtaposed with the fact that our school population changed dramatically this year as a result of redistricting. Our new boundary lines have brought a significant number of students to our school from war-torn nations, some of them never having attended school before. We also have a growing number of students who are homeless. Our entire faculty is scrambling to discover the practices we need to address the new composition of our student body. We can't do it alone; we need each other. To some extent, we will be able to use our existing grade-level and subject-area-specific professional learning communities to find answers to the new challenges, but I also want to be able to increase the opportunity each faculty member has to receive feedback about their teaching practices and student learning, as well as have the opportunity to grow professionally. That is why we are developing a Peer Coaching program. (Personal communication, August 2014)

Peer Coaching offers several vibrant structures for collegial interactions to address important initiatives. It also fosters meaningful, personalized, professional growth opportunities for staff; increases the influence of exemplary teaching; and magnifies the collective propensity of schools to be able to provide responsive, high-quality learning experiences to ensure that every student succeeds.