Using Coaching To Improve College Teaching

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Using Coaching
To Improve College Teaching

By Gloria A. Neubert and James B. Binko

Coaching was brought to the attention of educators when Joyce and Showers (1980), after reviewing research on the ability of teachers to acquire teaching skills, concluded that the most effective training activities combine theory, practice, feedback, and coaching. "Coaching" was defined as hands-on, in-classroom assistance with the transfer of new skills and strategies into the teacher's active repertoire. In 1982, Joyce and Showers delineated five major functions of a coach, the professional providing this "in-classroom assistance": (1) provides companionship for the teacher; (2) gives technical feedback to the teacher; (3) helps the teacher analyze applications of the new skill; (4) assists in adapting the skill to the level of the students; and (5) facilitates personal feelings of the teacher.

Since the publication of these formative ideas about coaching, other researchers (e.g., Baker and Showers, 1984; Servatius and Young, 1985; Neubert and Bratton, 1987; Moffett, St. John, and Isken, 1987; and others) have reported highly successful application of coaching in various precollegiate settings.

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Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this research was to determine the usefulness of coaching for improving classroom instruction at the college level. The inves-

tigation involved four, full-time college faculty volunteers at a state university who attempted to incorporate selected instructional skills into their active teaching repertoires with the assistance of peer coaches.

Specifically, this study set out to determine:

1. Can a college professor acquire an instructional skill using the coaching process?

2. To what extent can a college professor fulfill the five coaching functions?

3. What constraints are inherent in applying coaching to college teaching?

Coaching Project

This study of coaching was divided into three phases--diagnostic, implementation and evaluation.

During the **diagnostic phase**, the four faculty participants divided into coaching pairs. The partners in each pair exchanged visits during one semester to one another's classrooms, observing and collecting descriptive data (See Chart A) about teaching strategies employed in their respective classrooms. Observations were followed by conferences between the two partners using their data collection sheets in order to identify instructional patterns, strengths, and weaknesses. At the end of the diagnostic phase, each participant, in consultation with his/her coaching

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Chart A

Instructor _____

Observer _____

Date of Observation _____

Observation/Self Report

Major Objective(s):

Procedures:

Praise:

Questions:

Recommendations:

General Reaction/Notes:

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partner, identified the instructional skills he/she wished to add to his/her repertoire. (Coincidentally, all participants identified "increasing active student participation" as their goal, but each participant chose a different instructional procedure to accomplish this. Among the procedures chosen were: wait time, using small group discussions, phrasing and paraphrasing questions, and writing activities prior to discussion.)

The **implementation phase** lasted one semester and began with a workshop to familiarize the participants with the five functions of a coach, the time line for accomplishing their goals, and the steps they were to use during their coaching. Each coaching session was to involve the coaching partners in three steps: (1) **planning** their lessons together with attention to incorporating the designated skill; (2) **executing** the planned lesson with the coach in the classroom as an observer; and (3) **debriefing** after the observation with a view toward providing feedback on the skill being learned.

The **evaluation phase** consisted of interviews with individual participants by the project leader, one debriefing meeting involving all four participants, and collecting and analyzing various forms of written data.

Data Collection

Data to answer the three specific questions of this study were collected from three sources. First, a quantitative skill acquisition form was designed for each participant based on the specific strategies each was going to learn (See examples in Charts B and C). These forms were completed by the coach during each coaching observation. An outside observer also completed the forms when he observed each participant prior to the implementation phase and at the completion of the implementation phase. This procedure was used in order to validate quantitatively the degree of success of each faculty member in acquiring the new teaching skill.

A second source of data was transcriptions of the debriefing meeting and the interviews with individual faculty participants during the evaluation phase. The third source of data was a questionnaire, focusing on each participant's perceptions of his/her partner's fulfillment of the five coaching functions; the questionnaire was completed independently by each participant during the evaluation phase of the project (See Chart D).

Results

"Can a college professor acquire an instructional skill using the coaching process?"

All participants, when interviewed during the evaluation phase, reported they had, indeed, acquired the new instructional skill. Participants reported taking great pride in seeing the quantitative skill acquisition forms completed by their coach

Chart B

Observation Date _____

Skill Acquisition Form - Teacher X

Questions Asked	Time that elapses between asking the question and calling on the student (stop-watch time).	Number of students who have hands raised (volunteers to answer the question).
1.		
2.		

Chart C

Skill Acquisition Form - Teacher Y

Date:
Time:

Teacher-Focused Instruction			Student-Focused Instruction		
Lecture	TQSU	TASQ	SA	TPD	TQSAI

TQSU = Teacher Questioning Student for Understanding
TASQ = Teacher Answering Student Question
SA = Student Activity
TPD = Teacher-Prompted Discussion
TQSAI = Teacher Questions Student for Additional Information

Chart D

Professors Rate Their Coaches

Question	Coaching Function (Joyce & Showers, 1982)	Average - 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale
1. How successful was this coaching experience in providing for professional companionship (sharing with your partner, discussing problems and successes)?	Provision of companionship.	4.75
2a. How helpful was the assistance from your partner during the **planning** of your lessons (comments about methodology; suggestions for accomplishing your objective)?	Giving of technical feedback.	4.5
2b. How helpful was the feedback from your partner during the **debriefing** of the observed lesson?	Giving of technical feedback.	5.0
3. To what extent do you feel you can use the new skill or strategy independently (i.e., now without the assistance of your coach)?	Analysis of application: extending executive control.	4.75
4. To what extent do you feel that your students adjusted well to your use of this new skill or strategy?	Adaptation to the students.	4.75
5. How much assistance have you gotten from your partner in helping you to feel positive about yourself as you have tried the new skill or strategy?	Personal facilitation.	5.0

show improvement with each lesson. As one participant said, "These forms documented my sense of improvement."

Pre- and post-implementation observations by the outside observer validated the participants' testimonies. One participant, for example, went from no student-focused instructional time (all lecture) on the pre-implementation observation by the outside observer to all student-focused instruction on the post-implementation observation. Another participant, using wait time to increase student participation, went from four seconds wait time and an average of one student hand raised per question, to an average of 14 seconds wait time and an average of six student hands raised (35 percent of the class) during the pre- and post-implementation cycle.

This study makes no claim to be experimental in nature, and therefore has no comparative data to show whether the participants could have made these same gains independently, that is, without the assistance of a coach. When asked this question during the independent interviews, all participants stated that they probably could have acquired the instructional skill on their own, but had not. As one participant said, "I guess I could have, but I didn't do it for 25 years! I made no conscious effort... The difference now was that I had a coach. I wanted to do well for my coach." Another participant said, "My coach kept me honest; she held me accountable; she became my extrinsic motivator."

> *"To what extent can a college professor fulfill the five coaching functions?"*

During the evaluation stage and prior to the group debriefing, each participant completed a questionnaire based on Joyce and Showers' (1982) five coaching functions. Participants rated their coach on each of the five functions using a 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale. Chart D shows the questions, the function related to each question, and the average of the responses. Averages for all functions ranged from 4.5 to 5.0.

Companionship (Average - 4.75): During the interviews, participants noted that on the college level "we often talk about **what** we teach but rarely about **how** we teach.... Coaching provides an incredible opportunity to analyze our teaching with a professional colleague."

Technical Feedback (Averages 4.5 and 5.0): The coaches were rated highly effective in giving feedback. Participants also reported how important it was for the coach to be knowledgeable about the instructional skill her partner wanted to acquire in order to be able to give credible feedback.

Although the primary function of the coach was to offer feedback to the instructor trying to learn the new skill, it is interesting to note a kind of reciprocity which occurred.

Participants reported that while they were in the role of the coach observing their partners teach, they found themselves also involved in an introspective process, examining their own teaching styles. One participant stated, "I could not

separate myself and my own teaching from the coaching.... I would see my partner do something (like divide the class into groups for a discussion activity) and I would wonder how that would work in my teaching....and often what I noticed had nothing to do with the skill I was supposed to be working on.''

Sometimes the modeling transfer was more closely related to the instructional skill. For example, one coaching pair in this project included an experienced college professor whose style of teaching was very student-centered, and a first-year college professor who used primarily lecture. The less experienced professor reported that when she was in the role of coach, she found herself using her partner as a model for her own skill acquisition, as well as observing to provide her partner assistance in acquiring her skill.

Analysis of Applications (Average - 4.75): During the interviews, all participants confirmed with confidence that they could now use the learned instructional skill without the help of a coach. They acknowledged that they still needed to be very conscious of the skills during their planning and teaching. As one participant wrote on her questionnaire, ''I haven't 'naturalized' the skill yet --it is not a habit yet--but I can do it alone with deliberate planning, and I know my partner can. We now have the correct mind-set.''

Adaptation to the Students (Average - 4.75): Participant reports on this function included very positive comments such as: ''My students seemed quite comfortable.'' ''I suspect my students appreciated the change.'' And, ''I'm not sure my students were aware of any changes in my teaching style; it seemed quite natural.'' Adapting the skill to the students did not appear to cause any problems for the coaches or their proteges.

Personal Facilitation (Average - 5.0): Participants, without exception, were positive in their comments about the way their coaches fulfilled this function. ''I **liked** the coaching process. I **loved** having a buddy, a partner.... We all respond to encouragement. I am no exception. My partner was generous in her positive feedback and I, of course, was motivated by this.'' Another said, ''The observation sheets really helped me--especially the 'Praise' part. I found myself really needing and looking forward to that written praise from my coach.''

> *''What constraints are inherent in applying coaching to college teaching?''*

Even with volunteer, highly motivated professors, who had relatively flexible university schedules, time was unanimously cited as the major constraint: time to plan with one's coaching partner; time to debrief; and time to observe. To a lesser extent, concerns were reported by the participants about personality differences and anxieties about being observed.

Recommendations

Participants agreed on several recommendations for future coaching projects:

1. That the three phases (diagnostic, implementation, evaluation) of the coaching model be maintained. Participants were particularly emphatic about the necessity of the diagnostic phase because it provided opportunity to develop trust between partners, as well as to learn the partner's teaching style.

2. That released time be allocated participants due to the time-consuming nature of the project.

3. That coaching pairs be equal-status peers, not subordinate/superior pairs in order to avoid "observing" being interpreted as "evaluation," or "coaching" being interpreted as "supervision."

4. That each coach be knowledgeable about the skill his/her partner wished to learn in order to avoid the "blind-leading-the-blind" syndrome and to expedite mastery of the skill being learned.

Conclusions

Difficulties and Limitations

A summary of this study would be incomplete if it did not mention some difficulties and limitations which surfaced in applying the coaching model to college level teaching:

1. **Compatible Personalities**. Coaching, like other models for staff development, is an essentially personal as well as professional activity. In trying to identify a colleague who might make a good coaching partner, the participants in this study were very much concerned whether the potential partner would be compatible personally as well as professionally. The implication seems apparent: to make coaching work, it is not enough to identify two professors whose professional skills make a good fit. For instance, a professor who might benefit from the assistance of a coaching partner might fail to volunteer, or otherwise seek the needed assistance, due to personal traits in the potential coaching partner which are viewed as incompatible.

2. **Scheduling**. Studies of coaching at the elementary and secondary levels typically, and not surprisingly, have reported difficulties due to conflicts in teaching schedules; that is, there was insufficient flexibility in the schedule for coaching partners to observe and confer with one another. Scheduling became a limitation in this pilot study, also.

The original group of participants included eight faculty volunteers. All agreed in principle with becoming part of it. However, after the orientation meeting, one person withdrew because his teaching and committee schedules were already too heavy. Three others withdrew after several weeks when their efforts to match schedules failed. All three remained interested in the study, but were

unable to bend their schedules during their non-teaching time in order to observe and confer with a coaching partner.

   3. Observation vs. Evaluation. Being observed remains a delicate process for faculty at all levels, including experienced and inexperienced college professors. Indeed, all four participants in this study reported some initial wariness about being observed by their peers; the prospect of being observed, also, by an outside observer did not ease their anxieties. The uneasiness is particularly worth noting since all but one of the participants were experienced, highly regarded college level instructors, and well known to one another outside their classrooms. Every participant, nonetheless, reported that being "observed" was experienced by them as tantamount to being "evaluated" at some level of awareness during both the diagnostic and implementation phases of the study. This trepidation about being evaluated might be one further reason, albeit unvoiced, why some interested professors would disdain any effort to engage them as coaching partners, especially if they were less experienced and less familiar with each other than the participants in this study.

   4. Good Teachers/Poor Teachers. All four participants in this pilot study were regarded by their students and colleagues as very good college-level teachers. In each case, the instructional skill they chose as their goal in the coaching project was one they wanted to refine or fine tune, not a skill on which they were judged by others or judged themselves to be poor. This study leaves untouched, therefore, the question of whether "poor" teachers and "good" teachers benefit equally from coaching strategies at the collegiate level.

Positive Things

   Despite these limitations of the study, some very good, positive things happened for the participants. The following generalizations are in order, based on their experiences:

   1. The professors unanimously agreed that coaching helped them focus on specific classroom instructional skills for the purpose of self-analyzing their strengths and weaknesses. All four professors felt they had achieved their goal; i.e., that they incorporated a new skill into their repertoire of classroom strategies, a view supported by the observations of their coach as well as those of the outside observer. They were unanimous in their view that they accomplished a goal with the assistance of their coach which they had either put off or dismissed as unattainable for many years while teaching alone. Of equal importance, perhaps, is that all four participants completed the project feeling good about themselves and their experiences.

   2. Highly motivated, self-directed professors can "make coaching work," **despite scheduling obstacles.** Those professors who participated in the study reported they considered the additional time required a reasonable price to pay for the benefits derived. They especially valued the unaccustomed opportunity to

work together with a colleague in collecting data about their teaching, and then discussing, analyzing, and revising their classroom plans. They agreed, also, that were a future opportunity created for them to participate in a coaching project, they would be willing to make the necessary adjustments in their schedules and give the extra time required to make it work.

3. Professors can benefit through peer coaching in ways which are both incidental and directly associated with the skills they are trying to learn. As stated previously, all four participants who completed the coaching project accomplished their goals. These direct benefits were substantiated by the outside observer, as well as observations made by the participants themselves. Additionally noteworthy were the outcomes **incidental** to the goal attained. For example, those persons observing as coaches found themselves taking notes on many strategies used by the colleague they were observing, not so much to help their colleague, but to take back to their **own** classroom and try there. Those participants being observed also reported their coach frequently provided feedback on other features of their teaching which were incidental to the specific skill they were trying to learn, thereby offering very useful, although unsolicited, ''snapshots'' of their teaching for later discussion and analysis. Another benefit to the participants was the positive comments exchanged about each other's teaching during the debriefings and planning meetings. This opportunity for receiving positive reinforcement as a colleague and classroom performer, while incidental to the skill one is trying to receive coaching on, should not be dismissed, however, as unimportant to the benefits for college professors accustomed to working in relative isolation. The participants in this study regarded the opportunity for written and oral praise from a colleague as one of the strengths of coaching. As one professor stated, ''When you receive a good word from a colleague who has actually watched you teach, it has very special meaning.''

4. College professors are able to fulfill the five coaching functions. The intersubjective ratings of the participants as well as the observations by the outside observer verified the success of the coaching partners in fulfilling the functions of a coach. These professors were especially enthusiastic about the role of their coaches in their efforts to (1) provide companionship, (2) assist in analyzing applications of the new skill, and (3) facilitate the personal feelings of their coaching partner. They also found technical feedback of success with the skill being learned. Transcripts, as well as the ratings of the participants, revealed the coaches to be effective in helping their partners analyze ways to adapt the new skill to the level of college students.

Practical and Effective

The study suggests that professors, given a brief orientation to and training in the functions of a coach, can replicate these functions at a level perceived by their colleague partners as very helpful. As one participant remarked, ''On the whole,

the coach made me accountable. I wanted to please her, and I needed her feedback on my performance. Those are two sources of gratification as a professional you cannot achieve teaching alone.''

We believe this study provides strong evidence that peer coaching offers a useful, relatively time efficient, and inexpensive model for staff development at the college level. Furthermore, and most encouraging, it was judged both practical and effective by those professors participating in the project.

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