Peer Coaching: Reflective Professional Development for Educators

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Abstract

Peer coaching is an exciting and enriching practice that promotes reflection and growth in teaching. The reflective model of coaching, also referred to as the mirror model, places the control of areas for growth in the hands of the educator. This peer coaching process uses pre-visit conferences, classroom visits, and post-visit conferences. The coachee, the person who is being coached, decides focus for each visit. The coach collects the data during the classroom visit which the coachee decided would be collected. The coach presents the data to the coachee after the visit. The coachee then reflects upon the data to improve teaching practice. The coachee determines whether to continue with this same focus area or change to a new focus area. The choice that the coachee has in this process is empowering and provides the opportunity for self-determined professional growth. This reflective process allows educators to try new initiatives and see how these initiatives are working in the classroom. Educators can re-visit well-used teaching practices to see if these practices are still effective with their learners. The intent of peer coaching is to reflect on and improve teaching practice. Peer coaching makes learning personal and life-long.

Keywords: *Peer coaching, professional development, reflective coaching, mirror model coaching*

1. Introduction

One of the ways to transform teaching practice is to work together observing each other with the intent of improvement. Peer coaching is a strategy to sustain this continuous improvement. Coaching promotes on-going change and implementation of new ideas and skills with collegial feedback and support. Reflective peer coaching is an exciting practice that encourages educators to reflect on their teaching in order to improve learning. This reflective model of coaching is dynamic, collegial, and non-evaluative. This model of coaching is the focus of this paper.

2. Overview of Reflective Peer Coaching

One of the benefit of the reflective model is that it empowers educators [14]. The reflection assists the educator in examining teaching practice and making decisions from data. Reflection offers the opportunity to gauge confidence by accessing emotional information while thinking about an action and promotes a level of professionalism by taking responsibility to improve teaching [12, 13]. The practice of peer coaching promotes educators to steer their own professional development.

Peer coaching is a confidential process where two professional colleagues (peers) work together to reflect on practices, build and refine new skills, and solve problems in the workplace [10]. The coaching partners are of equal status [5]. This lessens the possibility of a power dynamic influencing the coaching process.

There are two participants in a peer coaching relationship, the coach and the coachee. The term coachee will be used throughout this paper to signify the person who is being coached.

3. The Peer Coaching Process

The coaching process consists of (a) pre-visit conference, (b) visit, (c) post-visit conference [1, 5, 10]. The wording has changed over the years from using the word 'observation' to using the word 'visit'. Although this change may seem slight, the intent is impactful. The use of visit aligns with the non-evaluative nature of peer coaching. The coachee drives the peer coaching process [13]. The coachee determines the focus area of learning, the time and duration of the visit, the significance of the data collected, and how the data will impact future teaching practice. The coachee makes the key decisions in the coaching process. This includes the focus, time, and duration of the visit; the data that is to be collected, and the interpretation of the data. In the pre-visit conference, the coachee identifies the specific objective/behavior to be observed.

Then, the coachee identifies the means for collection of observable data by coach. The coach can also be part of the process to determine the most effective data collection for the coachee's purposes [10]. The visit has one sole purpose. The coach collects only the data that the coachee has identified using the coachee's self-identified method of data collection [10]. At the post-visit conference, the coach shares the data as observed and without evaluation [10]. The coachee reflect upon this data. Reflection helps teachers to understand their practice [3]. However, the coach may ask open-ended questions for the coachee to consider [5, 8]). Then, the coachee decides upon the focus for the next visit. Both the coach and the coachee decide upon the time of the next pre-visit conference.

4. Elements for Success

One of the first and most important ways to form a successful coaching relationship is to choose someone whom you trust to be supportive of your success. This trust is fundamental to the relationship to form and to sustain a successful peer coaching experience [11, 16]. To aid in building that vital element of trust, it is important to adhere to these key elements of this model. These elements include being: a) collegial, b) professional, c) specific, d) confidential, e) reflective, f) dynamic and g) non-evaluative. It is important to keep the coaching relationship on a collegial basis. If competition enters the picture, the coaching partners can feel under pressure to perform. During the pre- and post-visits, keep the focus professional, not social. Coaching partners could choose to forego engaging in coaching if precious time is added for socializing. Focusing on specific and observable teaching behaviors strengthens the effectiveness of coaching. If vague or too broad topics are introduced, the data may not yield productive and usable results. Confidentiality is crucial, especially for trust. Coaching partners engaging in reflective coaching should NEVER share information from coaching sessions or about a coaching partner. Note: this confidentiality does not displace reporting any harmful situations. The coachee uses the data collected by the coach to reflect upon teaching practice. The coach should NEVER tell the coachee what to do. The coach can, and should, ask guiding questions or provide resources. Keep the coaching process dynamic and producing results. This dynamic nature sustains interest and supports the continuation in the coaching process as well as keeps the focus on improvement of the teaching/learning process. A coach needs to keep evaluative language from the conversation [15]. If a "Great lesson!" is shared in one visit and not others, the coachee can be left feeling that something was wrong leading to a potential disengagement from the coaching process.

5. Peer Coaching in Basic Education

School districts traditionally implement "one-shot" workshops to introduce new initiatives. This approach does not offer opportunities for the supported implementation of these initiatives [5]. Research shows that about 5-10% of this type of learning will actually transfer into practice while adding coaching takes that transfer to 90% [4, 7]. Peer coaching has been successfully implemented in professional development programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels [6]. This practice empowers teachers to set their own learning agendas for improving instruction. This can include implementation of new initiatives in order to receive continuing support as well as focusing on well-used strategies to improve and revise to ensure quality teaching/learning.

6. Peer Coaching in Higher Education

Peer coaching at the higher education level is effective due to the trusting relationship between coach and coachee, the specific focus of each coaching session, and the dedication to improving student learning. [6]. This practice encourages collaboration instead of competition and the students become the beneficiaries. One particular way that peer coaching can be effective is as a support to the peer review process that many institutions of higher learning have in place to evaluate teaching. Peer review of teaching is "…informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions." [2, p. 3]. Peer coaching is an excellent complement to the peer review process. The identified strengths and areas for growth can become the specific focus areas for coaching and reflection with the purpose of improvement of teaching/learning.

7. Lessons Learned

In addition to researching peer coaching, this practioner/scholar engages in peer coaching [13]. This includes both the basic and higher education levels. One of the coaching experiences that comes to mind right away is the first coaching experience after moving from the P-12 environment to higher education. The focus for the first visit was on examining discussion facilitation in order to engage graduate students in deeper discussions. The coach was to collect data that showed when questions were asked, both initial and probing, during the course of a whole class discussion. If it hadn't been for the data collected by the coach, I would have thought that I had only asked about 4 questions. The data showed that more than fourteen questions were asked, of which many were probing questions that deepened the discussion. Without this data from that "other set of eyes and ears", this practitioner/scholar would have missed out on important information. Flexibility was another valuable lesson that was learned. Time is such a precious resource. Sometimes, schedules did not permit face-to-face pre- and post-visits. That is when online vists saved the day. That virtual interaction provided time-saving opportunities to collaborate while sustaining the vital communication needed for a vital peer coaching relationship. Keeping a qualitative record of data and reflections is beneficial. This practice allows for reflection over time. The dynamic nature of peer coaching encourages revisiting previous coaching results and seeing how revisions to teaching impacts student learning. This continual improvement benefits the teaching/learning process. This practitioner/scholar knows peer coaching to be a valuable practice. The collaboration is energizing. The reflection, supported by the coach's guiding questions, has strengthened this practitioner/scholar's teaching and the students' learning [13].

8. Conclusion

Peer coaching is a valuable collegial professional development practice to improve teaching and learning. The practice empowers teachers to take their learning into their own hands. This personalized learning agenda is a valuable element for professional development and improvement of student learning.

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