

# ADDING COLLABORATIVE PEER COACHING TO OUR TEACHING IDENTITIES

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Although we are coming to better understand some of the characteristics of effective professional development, recent research suggests that personal and institutional constraints often limit the degree to which professional development affects teaching practice (Coskie & Place, 2008). Darling-Hammond (as cited in Collier, 2011) suggested that one of those constraints is time in schools for collaborative planning. She cites high-performing schools in Europe and Asia that have three to four times more collaborative planning time for teachers than schools in the United States, and she suggests that teachers in our country need to discover ways to collaborate to solve problems and improve practice.

One way to create the kinds of collaborative teaching communities that Darling-Hammond proposed is with peer coaching, and in this article

we describe a group of teachers who found a way to work and learn together by adding collaborative peer coaching to their identities as teachers. Some additional resources for peer coaching are listed in the Table.

We think of identities as being flexible and fluid, not fixed. Teachers can take on new identities when they gain knowledge about and collaboratively participate in exchanges with other learners (Gee, 2000). These interactions are especially visible within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger,

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**Table Additional Resources for Peer Coaching**

Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse: [www.literacycoachingonline.org/](http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/)

This site offers an array of policy and practice briefs and coaching tools for literacy coaches, teachers, and administrators. In addition to the coaching briefs, this site also includes a library of articles, a blog, coaching tools, forums, certification and courses, and state and national events related to coaching.

Peer Coaching for Improvement of Teaching and Learning: [teachersnetwork.org/TNLI/research/growth/becker.htm](http://teachersnetwork.org/TNLI/research/growth/becker.htm)

Jean M. Becker provides a rationale for peer coaching and outlines issues, components, benefits, supports, and policy recommendations for teachers and administrators interested in learning more about peer coaching in schools.

*Collaborative Peer Coaching That Improves Instruction: The 2+2 Performance Appraisal Model* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2005)

Authors Dwight Allen and Alyce LeBlanc present a simple concept for turning a school into a learning community, one that encourages teachers to visit each other's classrooms and create an environment of sharing and mutual trust. This book describes a method for improving teachers' practices and students' learning, one that is designed, initiated, and implemented by teachers.

1991), communities made up of people who share a common concern, a similar passion, and a commitment to their work, for example, groups of teachers.

Members of such communities are willing to wonder, to ask questions,

and to try to understand issues related to their work lives. They share their experiences, stories, tools, and methods, and through these kinds of interactions, they learn how to do their work better. This collaborative sharing of knowledge about teaching and learning—as well as the ensuing questions that were generated—served as the core of the peer coaching experiences of the teachers in our coaching course.

## Pause and Ponder

- Teachers: How can I find another teacher who might be interested in collaborative peer coaching?
- Teachers: When could we meet within the time constraints of our already busy teaching lives?
- Principals: How might I initiate a peer coaching model in my school?
- Principals: How can I build more time into the daily/weekly schedule for teachers to work collaboratively?

## Finding Openings to Work Together

Teachers were initially dismayed when faced with finding a coaching partner. They wondered how they could possibly go to one of their colleagues with such a request, thinking that it would be at best uncomfortable and at worst presumptuous. However, as the process unfolded, the reality of it was quite different. Teachers found effortless ways to come together with colleagues. For example, Abby (all names are pseudonyms) told us,

Uniting with my coaching partner happened rather naturally as a few colleagues and I were talking during our planning time one day, and Nancy expressed her concern over shared reading in her classroom and her desire to improve instruction. She specifically asked me where I get my ideas and how I plan for those lessons. We agreed to meet to look at the instruction...and plan a direction for shared reading in the future.

In this account a teacher expressed concern with her reading instruction and asked for suggestions from her colleague, and this was typical of the ways that coaching and partner teachers found each other.

Katelyn's experience was similar. She explained, "Joni walked into my room during planning and told me that she doesn't feel like she's reaching all readers with whole group instruction using the basal...." Again and again teachers found each other naturally through their common desire to understand aspects of their English language arts teaching more deeply.

## Locating Common Ground

When teachers identified a partner teacher with whom to collaborate, they paid close attention to their partner's interests and needs. They searched for common ground, ways that they could engage with their peers in authentic learning that would be mutually beneficial. Initially, the coaching teachers resisted observations as a way to learn together, as it seemed to position them as an expert rather than a colearner. They felt that this would stand in the way of authentic learning about shared interests. Karen told us,

I feel so uncomfortable at the idea of going in to observe the learning environment. I know that my purpose is to see what the kids are doing, the language being used, the learning environment itself. I also know that several of the teachers on

my team—actually all of us—feel uncomfortable when someone observes us. We all equate an observation to an evaluation.

Largely, the teachers avoided observations in favor of sharing in events common to each other, such as mutually analyzing student assessment data, choosing appropriate texts for individual students and small groups, observing another teacher together, and watching teaching videos together (e.g., Annenberg streaming videos [www.learner.org/resources] and other professionally prepared videos about literacy teaching and learning). The conversations that accompanied these joint activities became spaces in which peer and partner teachers critically questioned issues of teaching and learning. For example, Leila shared,

During planning today we watched our first DVD...with a guided writing segment to go along with guided reading instruction. We were not pleased with the video because she (the narrator) chose random words for the students to write down. Teresa and I discussed how much better it is when you include words from the current text they are reading in guided reading or current word study or vocabulary words that you are incorporating throughout the day.

In this account, the teachers critically analyzed a video they were watching, arguing with the narrator's approach to develop more effective instruction for guided reading and writing. Time and again, the teachers shared examples of the powerful conversations they engaged in around artifacts that reflected their common interests and needs.

### **Using Restraint**

As teachers began to establish peer coaching relationships with colleagues, they knew they would need to listen

*“Time and again, the teachers shared examples of the powerful conversations they engaged in around artifacts that reflected their common interests and needs.”*

carefully, being open to the other person's perspectives and needs. Nora told us that she listened to her fellow teacher “for what I would listen for with my students, the one thing I could coach her on in that moment that would move her forward in her teaching practices.” However, she finished her statement by saying, “It wasn't easy and took restraint,” and Nora's experience mirrored many of the teachers' experiences.

For example, Katherine told us, “I had to give up the control of what was going on in the classroom for Alesia to create and learn from her own thinking,” and Karen said, “I tried really hard not to say too much. I need to use this opportunity to hold back my impulsivity and really listen to what is being said.” This kind of restraint became a responsibility and a common theme among the teachers as they took on the role of peer coach.

Although they needed to use restraint and listen carefully, the teachers also knew that they needed to think deeply and seriously about how they would respond to what they were hearing. Teresa told us, “I had never thought about the fact that coaches, like classroom teachers, must choose their words carefully in order to be effective communicators.” In an example of choosing her words carefully, Emma wrote about an instructional decision her coaching partner made with which she did not fully agree. After carefully

reflecting on her response, she told her partner that she “would love to think with her about it.” She explained that she “made sure that I kept it very positive.”

### **Becoming Colearners**

The teachers often told us that they also used restraint because they did not want to be perceived as the “expert” or the person who knew all the answers. Abbey explained, “I knew from my own experiences that teachers, especially hard-working teachers, don't want to be told what to do. So I tried to avoid direct suggestions during our conversations.” Instead of expert, the peer teachers wanted to be perceived as equal partners, as colearners. Lena told us, “Sometimes it is just nice to discuss what is going on with others because that is the most valuable way to learn together,” and Christine wrote about how productive taking a stance as colearner was to her and her partner teacher, Mary:

Towards the end of our conversation, Mary did provide the opportunity for me to share more ideas with her for minilessons.... I felt, though, that had I offered these suggestions/ideas without Mary asking for extra support in this area, I would place myself in the role of the expert, something that I did not want to happen. By allowing Mary to brainstorm ideas along with me, we continued the rest of our...meeting as two colleagues who were participating in a professional conversation.

The teachers were thoughtfully intentional about taking the role of

colearner with their partners instead of the role of expert, striving instead to create a learning relationship that positioned them as equals.

## Gaining a Sense of Confidence

### *Creating Reciprocal Relationships*

As the teachers began to learn about peer coaching, they discovered ways to interact with partner teachers that were collaborative, locally focused, and student centered. As they reflected on the peer coaching experience, they began to develop confidence in their collaborations. Along with this sense of confidence came new understandings about coaching and professional development. Cathy shared,

There were issues and questions that arose during my coaching sessions which I did not have an answer for; rather, I

talked these issues and questions out with my colleague until we came to an answer together. While talking out these issues and questions, I suddenly realized that coaching was not a relationship of expert and novice, but rather two professionals who were collaboratively working together for the good of the teacher's students.

More and more strong voices surfaced as the teachers began articulating the need for collaborative learning in the profession of teaching. Macie acknowledged, "The best coaching might just be found in the reciprocal relationship established between two colleagues who value each other's opinions, want to spend time thinking together, and who have much to offer each other toward growth." Nora also wrote of her relationship with her peer teacher. "We think hard, have difficult conversations and respect each other enough to challenge each other."

*"With this renewed sense of confidence also came the courage to open classroom doors."*

### *Breaking Down the Barriers of Isolation*

With this renewed sense of confidence also came the courage to open classroom doors, to ask burning questions, and to expect support from colleagues. Many of the teachers who were involved in peer coaching experiences have vowed to continue the collaborative work. Diane explained,

The best part is now I have a colleague to work with as we plan more guided reading lessons together. Stephanie and I have both agreed that we are not done with this experience! This is so much more powerful than any program can do for one teacher. Because our school does not currently have a literacy coach, our faculty has to work together to coach each other.

Although isolation is more often the mode of being for teachers than collaboration (Clandinin, 2001), the peer coaches began to break down some of the barriers that upheld a view of teaching as an isolated practice. Doing so allowed them to be more collaborative and to find enjoyment in working together to improve teaching and learning. Leila summed it up when she said,

Through this coaching experience, I have grown to take delight in the one-on-one interaction with colleagues. I have grown to believe coaching can be two colleagues working together and thinking creatively



to push students to be more successful as readers and writers.

### ***Creating Complementary Opportunities for Learning***

Anne wrote about the fact that the everyday organization in which many of us live our teaching lives tends to support parallel learning opportunities rather than complementary learning opportunities.

As time went on, I quickly discovered that our “positions” were much more complementary; the more I was willing to share about myself, the more I asked questions, the more open and honest I was, the more I learned about myself, my partner, and coaching.

Building on ideas about parallel play, we believe that in parallel learning, teachers engage in independent activities that are similar to but not necessarily influenced by or shared with others. By that we mean, they work shoulder-to-shoulder for the good of their students but do not always have opportunities to engage collaboratively in curricular conversations about their teaching concerns and practices. Their parallel paths do not meet.

However, when learning is complementary, as Anne noted, times and spaces are constructed so that teachers are able to engage in activities that *can* have an influence on each other’s teaching. Darling Hammond (as cited in Collier, 2011) wrote that in complementary and collaborative

settings, “You always have a way to have partners help you solve your problem, to help you improve your practice” (p. 13).

When these kinds of partnerships occur, teachers complement each other; they complete each other in the learning process, and this is what happened in the peer coaching experiences. Teachers began to work in complementary ways. Learning was not parallel; rather the peer coaching model created two-way learning opportunities for teachers in which knowledge was coconstructed as they “engaged in joint activities which were negotiated rather than imposed” (Wells, 1999, p. 227). Both participants were learning together. As Lori said, “I am not really sure who the coach was and who the learner was ....!”

### **Taking an Intentional Stance**

To engage in peer coaching experiences, the teachers had to be intentional in creating spaces for coming together, deliberately finding ways to carve out times to meet and locate places in which to work together within the demands of their busy teaching days. Yet the teachers found ways to do exactly that. They honored the need to collaborate and creatively structured time to meet to engage in dialogue, analyze test data, share resources, and reflect together. As they did so, they participated in rich and constructive curricular conversations,

opened their classrooms doors to each other, and learned more about teaching and their students’ learning along the way.

Because many schools do not include time for teachers to regularly collaborate,

## **TAKE ACTION!**

- 1.** Set your goals by deciding what you want to accomplish as you engage in collaborative coaching with a peer. Do you have a particular concern with your teaching or your students’ learning that you want to explore?
- 2.** Find a coaching partner who shares your concerns or with whom you would like to collaborate on mutual goals, for example, issues related to literacy teaching and learning. Keep in mind that each of you is an equal and knowledgeable peer and that you will share responsibility in decision making, with each partner contributing to the choices.
- 3.** Present your plan to your principal to advocate for more time/resources to engage in collaborative peer coaching. Can your administrator help you restructure any part of your teaching day or week?
- 4.** Take control of your time and space by asking: When can we meet and where? What will be the focus of our collaboration, and what kinds of events will we engage in to help us better understand the issues we want to explore? For example, will we choose to observe one another or observe another teacher, watch a teaching video together, evaluate assessment data, or choose materials to support our teaching?
- 5.** Make your partnership and the knowledge you coconstruct public. Share your experiences with fellow teachers. You may serve as a model to other teachers who would like to form collaborative peer coaching partnerships.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### IRA Journal Articles

- “The Changing Face of Education: Teachers Cope With Challenges Through Collaboration and Reflective Study” by Carla C. Dearman and Sheila R. Alber, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2005
- “Differentiated Coaching: Fostering Reflection With Teachers” by Katie Stover, Brian Kissel, Karen Haag, and Rebecca Shonike, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2011
- “Raising Literacy Levels With Collaborative On-Site Professional Development in an Urban Disadvantaged School” by Eithne Kennedy and Gerry Shiel, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2010

we propose that they take a deliberate stance toward working together. By finding one partner teacher who shares common interests about teaching—one teacher with whom they want to wonder and share ideas, experiences, and questions—teachers can become not only colearners but models for others as well. In doing so, they can create the structural conditions within a school necessary to work in partnership and coinquire about teaching.

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