
Peer coaching as an effective tool in teaching development

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Abstract— This report reflects on the experience of conducting peer coaching for improvement of teaching practices and student learning. Peer coaching was first conducted by the Science Department offering Cambridge A-Level Programme on two Semester One classes. The observed lesson was targeted on engaging students through collaborative learning. Another experience on peer coaching was conducted by a group of teachers from different subjects and programmes, and targeted on learning by using formative assessment. The model attempted was the collegial peer coaching, and it included three main processes: pre-observation planning and discussion, two consecutive peer observations, and post-observation discussion. Peer coaching was found to be an impactful tool for professional development, because it offers teachers the opportunity for self-reflection, sharing of classroom experience, and mutual growth in teaching.

Keywords: coaching, peer coaching, leadership, leadership development, experiential learning, self-learning, action learning.

INTRODUCTION

Peer coaching is a procedure in which two teachers collaborate to help one or both teachers improve some aspect of their teaching. Robbins (1991, p. 1) defines peer coaching as follows:

In peer coaching, a teacher and a colleague plan a series of opportunities to explore the teacher's teaching collaboratively. One adopts the role of coach or “critical friend” (someone in whom one has trust and confidence and who can offer constructive feedback in a positive and supportive manner) as some aspect of teaching or of classroom life is explored. During and after the process, the coach provides feedback and suggestions to the other teacher. The type of feedback the coach provides will depend on the goals that have been established. We prefer feedback to be nonjudgmental and nonevaluative in most cases. The coach offers observations and suggestions, but the other teacher makes his or her own decisions about what, if anything, to change as a result of the peer-coaching relationship. In other words, each teacher still has the main responsibility for his or her professional development and does not hand over control to a colleague. There may, however, be situations in which more direct input and evaluative feedback is required, such as when a novice teacher has been receiving very poor teaching evaluations or is experiencing difficulty with a teaching assignment and asks to work with a more experienced teacher to help address the problem.

Peer coaching is a process that are been conducted privately through which two or more professional colleagues are work together to reflect on current practices, expand, refine, and build new skills, share ideas, teach one another, conduct classroom research, or solve problems in the workplace. Although peer coaching seems to be the most prominent label for this type of activity, a variety of other names are used in schools such as peer support, consulting colleagues, peer sharing, and peer caring. These other names seem to have evolved, in some cases which are out of teacher discomfort with the term of coaching. Some people claim the word coaching shows that one person in the collaborative relationship has a different status. This concern is to be expected because the label may imply to some an inequality among colleagues that is inconsistent with the historical norm of a nonhierarchical structure within the teaching ranks.

Sizer 1985, that state as research and experience inform us, “The reality is that a teacher has the same ‘rank’ in his or her last year of teaching as the first”. Teachers have the same classroom space, number of students,

and requirements. This is regardless of how coaching relationships are been labeled. Teachers are all given full focus on the collaborative development, refinement, and sharing of craft knowledge for improvement. Many people get confused in differentiates between the evaluating and peer coaching. Evaluation and peer coaching is two different things. Evaluation is done base on the yearly appraisal towards the teachers and more focus on the capability and the effectiveness of the teachers in their teaching technique in order to make the teachers to be more efficient in teaching. Peer coaching is not intended as a corrective activity or strategy to “fix” teachers but peer coaching is to help the teachers or push the teachers to be more creative and innovative during the teaching and learning session. Peer coaching is also to encourage the teachers to share their problem, experience and knowledge with others teachers in their teaching and learning practices.

People who are engage in peer coaching are unique people not only as individual but as a strong team. Some peer coaching involves in two or more colleagues working together around the shared observation of teaching. In this instance, there is generally a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference. The teacher, who invites a coach in, referred to as “the inviting teacher,” conduct the coaching process. The inviting teacher has to identify the focus of the observation, the form of data collection, guidelines for the coach's behavior in the classroom during the observation, the parameters of the discussion of observed teaching, and the date and time of the observation. Other types of peer coaching involve a pair or a team of teachers to co-planning a lesson or curriculum unit and some of it involve problem solving or study groups. Some coaching may happen between an expert and an apprentice or between experienced and less-experienced teachers. According to Shulman (1991), he suggested that there is another approach in which teachers will share stories about teaching experiences in the peer coaching session. This approach shows that teaching as a narrative act and provides a non-threatening way for teachers to share pedagogical knowledge among them. Other teachers have used the peer coaching process to conduct action research. In this situation, a teacher formulates a set of hypotheses about classroom practices and develops a plan to test them by asking a colleague to observe and take notes.

Becker (2007) defined peer coaching as a “process in which two or more professional colleagues work together for specific predetermined purpose in order the teaching performance can be improved as well as validated” (p. 2). Peer coaching differs from mentoring as it based on mutually sharing the power and trust relationship (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Veenman & Denessen, 2001).

Peer coaching involves three stages. The first stage is the preview conference, in which the lesson is planned and discussed between the teacher and the coach. They select a goal for the lesson and the area of observation. The second stage is the lesson observation, when the teacher teaches the lesson while the coach observes and documents the lesson using available tools (e.g., written notes, audio recordings, video recordings). The final stage is the reflective conference, which takes place after teaching the lesson. The peers meet together to discuss the observational notes in a reflective manner (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Neubert & Stover, 1994).

Applying a successful peer coaching strategy requires considering several important aspects. Developing a trusting relationship is important for building a social interaction among participants so they can ask questions and give honest feedback freely (Huston & Weaver, 2008; Vidmar, 2006). Moreover, the coaching tasks between the colleagues (e.g., questions, suggestions, and critique) should remain confidential to eliminate any negative effects on promotion possibilities and tenure decisions. The disclosure of confidential information could result in threatening the respect for the colleague as a teacher (Hicks, 1999; Vidmar, 2006). Participation in the peer coaching strategy must also be voluntary for both the coach and the colleague in order to improve their teaching based on their own self-interests (Bernstein, Johnson, & Smith, 2000; Huston & Weaver, 2008).

In addition, training on peer coaching skills moves participants from traditional evaluations to the coaching style of evaluation (Skinner & Welch, 1996), which is a fundamental component of success that can use different methods, such as lecturing, workshops, instructional seminars, and orientations (Bowman & McCormick 2000).

The researchers offered a workshop approach to developing peer coaching skills within school children's ordinary classroom context. The specific focus was on the skills of giving and receiving feedback and this was delivered through a workshop which incorporated a number of different activities. The selection

of these activities deliberately aimed at building coaching skills and did not seek to address academic areas of the curriculum. The rationale for this decision came from a number of key sources: firstly the experience of the researchers as coaches and teachers; secondly the lack of knowledge of the academic abilities in each class; and thirdly the influence of Wegerif, et al's (2004) work on the development of talk skills across the curriculum. In their project work 'Thinking together' they promote an approach to developing the skills of talk and thinking away from academic areas first before attempting to apply these to academic areas. We did not want children to become anxious about their academic skills and therefore not participate in the activities to develop their coaching skills. We decide upon a structure for the workshop based on these ideas and the previous work of Vlach and Carver (2008).

Utilising procedures already in place from the Primary National Strategy (PNS) of different forms of 'talk partners', the activities introduced to children focused on how to give and receive feedback after working a range of tasks. Initially these tasks were not based around 'academic' subjects and skills but around activities involving drawing, simple game play and a physical task. The rationale for this was to build up the peer coaching skills without directly addressing academic achievement in order to avoid raising levels of anxiety and potentially demotivating the children.

The key long term aim of this research is to examine whether the development of peer coaching skills in 'non academic' tasks have an impact on 'academic' attitudes and achievement. This is contrast to existing research around coaching which mostly focuses directly on the impact of subject achievement. The research also aims to answer the following question: Is it possible to develop peer-coaching skills in young children when the contextual constraints mean ignoring many of the key principles of what is seen as 'good coaching practice'? These principles include: "self-responsibility" and "confidentiality" (Bresser and Wilson, 2010) which we were not able to deliver through our workshops.

The coaching principles used to structure of the tasks given to the children and the selection of skills as a focus combines a number of different perspectives on coaching (Cox, Bachikirova and Clutterbuck, 2010; Garvey, Stokes and Megginson, 2009; Grant, 2003; Joyce and Flowers, 1996; Palmer and Whybrow, 2007; Passmore, 2010; Peltier, 2010). The research methods reported are predominantly ethnographic combined with pre- and post- responses to the drawing task given, linked to the work of Vlach and Carver (2008) though their focus was on observational coaching rather than peer coaching feedback skills. Our methodological approach includes class, teacher and researcher observations, and recording children's responses both as a result of the tasks and during their peer coaching feedback sessions.

Peer coaching is one of the way for the school to help the teachers to develop their professional development for all teachers. Peer coaching is also one of the model that can be use to help among teachers to develop and try new strategies in order to determine what does and does not work by critically evaluate their own beliefs about the teaching and learning strategies and process. (Pajak, 2003) state that, peer coaching is a development or effective model in supervision. According to (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995), peer coaching is often identified by various names such as peer mentoring, learning centered supervision, peer supervision, and cognitive coaching. Peer coaching is built upon trusting relationships that develop between teachers. It is based on mutually working together to improve teaching skills in order to improve student learning. Usually, peer coaching often been applied in school when the principals does not have the necessary time to fully supervise all the teachers in school. Most principals have a very busy day and situations arise during the day which could keep the principals from supervising their teachers. With the implementation of peer coaching in schools, teachers are observed and offered suggestions by their peers that are more senior or an expert in your subject area than the teachers that will be supervise and the peers have full knowledge about coaching and supervising experiences.

When peers who are the one going to do the supervise, this can be helpful because even when principals observe teachers, most times there are no suggestions given to improve teaching and the teachers might feel uncomfortable or unable to express their problems related to their daily teaching process. Upon participating in peer coaching, teachers can see other teachers' techniques and they can highly benefit from seeing how other teachers do the same job. The teachers also could get a great insight on different techniques to use in order to help students develope deeper understanding into the subject taught by the teachers. Teaching is

often thought of as an isolated act even though most teachers may not realize it. Most teachers are not utilizing their greatest resources by not visiting other classrooms among themselves in school. By not being able to do the visit to the other classes in school, the teacher is unable to learn other people's skills in delivering their teaching technique while teaching the students.

Peer coaching is a part of productive practice and an important means for instituting collaborative efforts and it warrants consideration as a potentially serviceable solution for improving teacher effectiveness when implemented in order to develop the professional development among the teachers. Peer coaching can alter classroom practices for emerging teachers. According to Linda R. Britton, Kenneth A. Anderson, 2010, based on the research they done, the data they collected also indicates that participants in this study enjoyed learning about and participating in peer coaching and that the peer coaching process was easy to implement. Therefore, we recommend the addition of peer coaching as a requirement in the pre-service teacher-training process. We feel that incorporating a peer coaching component in the pre-service experience induces a disposition of collaboration early in the process rather than promoting a culture of autonomy that would have to be altered once the transition to teaching is made. Peer coaching is really important in order to help the teacher to develop their professionalism. By implementing peer coaching at school, the teachers will be more open in sharing the problem they are facing and this will help them to improve and give the best of themselves while teaching and be able to develop the happiness and understandability to the students in class, when the students are happy with the teachers' teaching methods, this will help to improve the school reputation and will bring the school to be the best school.

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