

Peer Coaching: An Effective Staff Development Model

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Peer coaching is a professional development method that has been shown to increase collegiality and improve teaching. It is a confidential process whereby teachers share expertise, provide feedback and support, and assist each other in developing and refining classroom skills. It is also an on-going process that combines in-class training with opportunities for non-evaluative feedback and discussion. Five functions of successful peer coaching, as defined by Showers (1984), include:

- **Companionship:** Teachers discuss successes and failures with a new teaching model;
- **Feedback:** Teachers give each other objective, non-evaluative feedback;
- **Analysis:** Teachers help each other master a new approach until it is internalized, spontaneous, and flexible;
- **Adaptation:** Teachers work together to mold a teaching model to the needs of the class; and
- **Support:** The coach supports the peer teacher in applying a new strategy.

Although peer coaching involves many forms of teacher interaction and communication, four broad categories emerge:

- **Technical Coaching** is used to translate inservice training into classroom practice.
- **Collegial Coaching** is a self-perpetuating process to improve teaching through professional dialogue and exchange.
- **Challenge Coaching** involves teachers, aides, librarians, and/or administrators in resolving a persistent instructional problem.
- **Team Coaching** is a variation on peer and team teaching whereby visiting mentors teach alongside the classroom teacher.

Implementing Peer Coaching

There are several approaches to initiating peer coaching. Some programs begin with two teachers jointly planning instructional segments that utilize new knowledge and skills, e.g., a bilingual Spanish teacher and a science teacher develop a unit on sound that incorporates the language and culture of both English and Spanish speaking students. Observation notes, videotapes, coded information, narrative reports, and discussion form an ongoing effort to improve the delivery of instruction (Ward, 1986).

In another approach, a highly skilled teacher models lessons using new skills and knowledge. Other teachers then use the model with similar lessons in their own classrooms. This approach is often used by ESL teachers to demonstrate how contextualized language can help LEP students comprehend content area subject matter (Griffin et al., 1984).

Like many innovations in education, peer coaching is more complex than it appears. To implement an effective program, educators will want to explore the following areas:

- **The coaching process:** Peer coaching typically follows these steps: pre-observation conference to establish observation criteria, classroom observations, data collection, data analysis, then post-conference to establish subsequent observation criteria.
- **Coaching vs evaluation:** Peer coaching is a non-evaluative means of providing collegial assistance in a professional development process. It requires an atmosphere of trust and support where teachers feel safe to experiment, fail, reflect, question, solicit help, revise, and try again.
- **Selection of partners:** Teachers should be allowed to select their own coaching partners. As members of coaching teams structured across departments or grade levels, colleagues become more aware of common resources and challenges and begin to focus observations on targeted instructional practices rather than lesson content.
- **Training of coaches:** An effective training-for-coaching program includes pre-coaching and follow-up training. It must empower teachers by helping them identify practices that impede movement toward collegiality and equipping them with an extended repertoire of coaching skills, e.g., providing prompt, descriptive, non-evaluative feedback.
- **Administrative support:** An effective coaching program requires an active, supportive instructional leader (Kinsella, 1993).

Practical Suggestions

Joyce and Showers (1987) have identified six low-cost strategies administrators can use to facilitate a successful peer coaching program:

1. **Free teachers for observation by taking their classes.** Administrators alone, teaching one period a day, can provide about one-fourth of the hours needed.
2. **Schedule larger than classroom-size group instruction.** By bringing students together in larger groups, teachers can make time to visit one another.
3. **Arrange for independent study and research.** Frequently, teachers need to locate and assemble information, study, and then practice instruction. Often these activities can take place in a library or a setting other than the classroom.
4. **Enlist volunteer aides.** Aides enable a number of arrangements to be made that free teachers for peer coaching.
5. **Seek out student teachers.** Student teachers (and aides in some states) can be given limited certificates permitting them legal responsibility for students.
6. **Organize team teaching.** Teachers may be paired not only for coaching but also for instruction. This would enable teachers to free one another to engage in peer-coaching observations and discussions.

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