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t3 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

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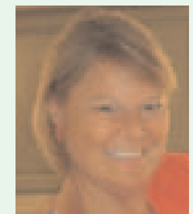

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INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE

Literacy coaches use this method one-on-one

By Marilyn Duncan

Instructional dialogue is a process that helps teachers increase their knowledge and commit to a change in classroom practice. Their commitment to change instruction occurs when they see themselves putting into practice what they have learned and the results are evidenced in increased student achievement.

Rita Bean (2004) describes a continuum of coaching through three levels of intensity.

- At Level One, coaches develop relationships with the colleagues they support.
- Level Two is more formal. Activities at Level Two may be in small group or with the whole staff and are designed based upon the needs at the school, grade, or classroom level.
- Finally, there is Level Three, a more intense form of coaching where the coach is working directly with a teacher.

While I operate at all levels of coaching with the people I support, the coaching that consistently has the biggest impact on student learning is at Bean's Level Three and involves what is called instructional dialogue.

Instructional dialogue is a structured

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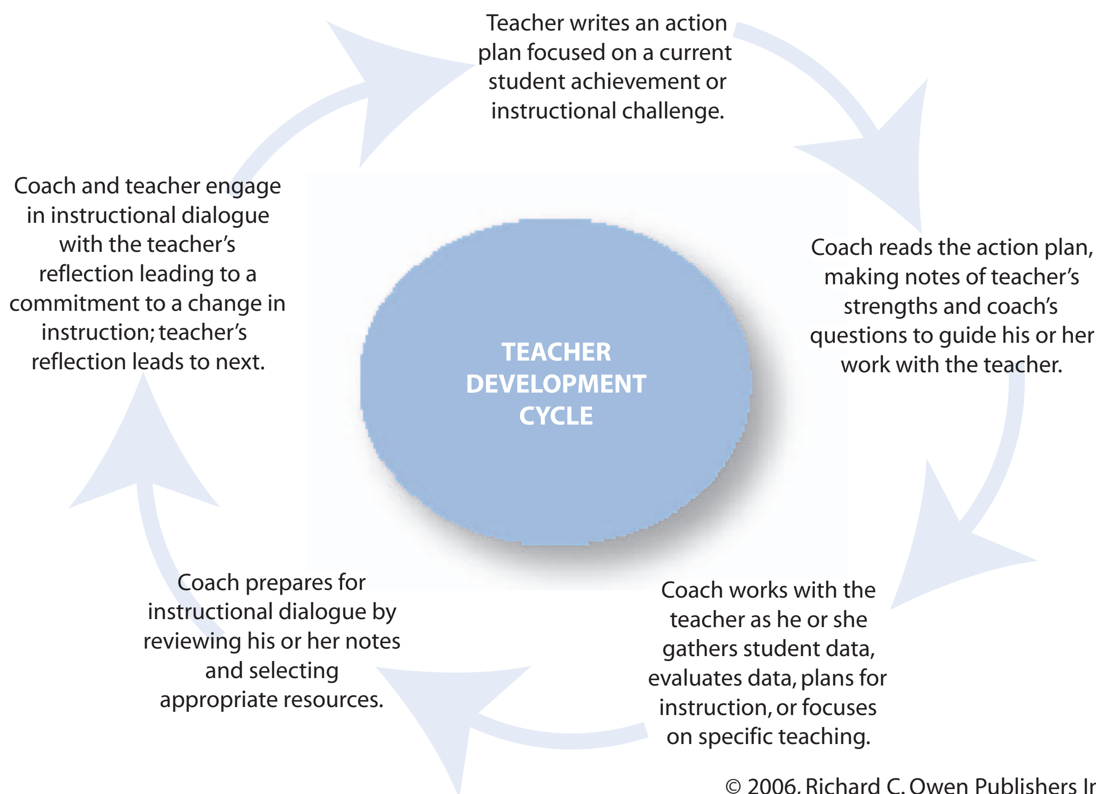

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conversation about teaching and learning that provides feedback to the teacher. The measure of improvement is always student learning. Instructional dialogue is neither an interrogation nor a therapy session. It's a discussion between colleagues learning from each other to do their jobs better. Instructional dialogue is an opportunity for teachers through the mentorship and facilitation of a coach to think about their classroom practice and ways to improve it. The figure above provides an overview of this cycle.

The process begins when the teacher, with the support of the coach, identifies a challenge to instruction through an action plan. Together, the teacher and coach determine what their job-embedded work will look and sound like. The coach might demonstrate an assessment tool or instructional approach for the teacher. The coach might work alongside the teacher to evaluate student work or conduct small group instruction. The coach might observe the teacher during classroom instruction. Regular time is always established for instructional dialogue. This means the teacher and the coach have a scheduled an uninterrupted opportunity for discussion and feedback.

The job of the coach during instructional dialogue is to:

- Lead the structured conversation;
- Listen carefully for what the teacher already knows and what the teacher can learn next;
- Know when to ask questions and when to provide answers and strategies for implementation; and
- Support the teacher in making a direct link between his or her learning and student learning.

Instructional dialogue is systematic and focused. The focus comes from the current challenge the teacher is experiencing and has identified in the action plan. Data collected by the coach (such as observational notes, conversations with students, student work samples) will support the dialogue. Analyzing this kind of data with the coach helps the teacher make a commitment to a change in instruction. That change is expected to increase student achievement.

Listening and questioning effectively

One of the most important skills a coach can develop is learning how to listen. Listening

Listening allows the coach to identify an entry point to the teacher's learning.

Portions of this article are adapted from Chapter 5 of *Literacy Coaching: Developing Effective Teachers through Instructional Dialogue*, by Marilyn Duncan. Copyright, 2006. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

allows the coach to identify an entry point to the teacher's learning. When given time to talk about their teaching, teachers usually share a specific challenge in the first few minutes of the conversation. A skilled listener can quickly confirm strengths and uncover these challenges if a teacher is unable to do so.

The coach can start the conversation in a number of ways. For example, a teacher who is gathering formative assessment data might be invited to talk about "how it went" or "what you learned about your students." A teacher who is exploring effective questioning in small group instruction might be asked, "What were some of the things you heard your kids say today?" The teacher selecting resources for his instruction might be asked to share what he's thinking about after he and the coach worked together to select literacy resources.

These initial questions are designed to be open-ended enough to encourage conversation and making the beginning of the dialogue risk free; an opportunity for a teacher to reflect on the challenge being experienced and what is needed to overcome it.

Once the teacher begins to talk, the coach listens carefully. For many coaches, this is challenging. Some coaches might feel that just listening means that they are not doing their jobs. On the contrary, appropriate meaningful feedback means coaches have to listen to determine what feedback is needed and to determine the right time to provide feedback.

Questions are an integral part of instructional dialogue. It's the coach's ability to listen that leads to appropriate questioning. The coach's questions during instructional dialogue come from what the teacher says. The questions aren't scripted; they are based upon data the coach has collected during her work with the teacher and the responses of the teacher. They are not the "guess what's in my head" kind of questions. Instead, these questions uncover the teacher's beliefs and challenge them in a way that extends the teacher's thinking.

See a transcribed exchange on p. 4 between Alex, a teacher seeking feedback about her students' engagement in independent work, and myself.

When to listen; when to ask; when to tell

Learning occurs in different ways for different individuals. The dialogue example on pp. 4-6 demonstrates the importance of the coach's skill in knowing how to listen. It has also emphasized the need for the coach to know when to ask questions appropriate to the level of the teacher's current knowledge. It is just as important for the coach to know when the teacher can work through an issue herself or simply to tell. The effective coach knows when to listen, when to ask, and when to tell. Feedback through instructional dialogue is the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own practices with support from a colleague. Teachers are given the appropriate amount of support they need for learning.

Listening, asking, telling — each is part of the collegial relationship that develops between the coach and teacher. It's not only the teacher who has learned and committed to trying something with her students. The coach learns as well. Coaches learn by working with their colleagues. They learn about collecting, analyzing, and using student data. They learn more about supporting adult learners. They also learn that coaching is a partnership to which both teacher and coach contribute. The partnership is about bringing out the best in both; becoming a more effective teacher and becoming a more effective coach. And both contribute to improving the achievement of every student.

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About the author

Marilyn Duncan has been a teacher for over 30 years. Her work has been in the classroom with children and as a teacher developer. She trained literacy coaches in schools across the United States. She was the Trainer of Coordinators for The Learning Network, where she developed the trainers of coaches. She has recently been involved in a large-scale district initiative in Colorado. Duncan is the author of two professional books, *Literacy Coaching: Developing Effective Teachers Through Instructional Dialogue* (2006) and *The Kindergarten Book: A Guide to Literacy Instruction* (2005). She lives with her husband, Peter, in Wanaka, New Zealand.

LISTENING AND QUESTIONING IN ACTION

An example of instructional dialogue

Alex is a teacher seeking feedback about her students' engagement in independent work. Marilyn is the author in her role as an instructional coach. The text in green reflects Marilyn's observations and thinking while coaching.

Marilyn: How did you feel about your students' engagement during independent work time today?

This question confirms the teacher's action plan and provides time for the teacher to talk.

Alex: Not much differently than I feel any day. I can tell you right now the names of the students who are working hard and seem involved in their work. And I can tell you the names of the students who look like they are wasting their time and mine too.

What the teacher says about knowing who was engaged and who was not engaged leads to my next question.

Marilyn: Let's talk about some of those kids who are engaged and some you feel aren't engaged. If we compare our observations, maybe we can come to some conclusions.

Alex: That's easy. (She begins by talking about the students who are not engaged.)

I suggest a shift in focus in the conversation.

Marilyn: Let's start by talking about the students who are engaged first.

She needs to see that she has contributed to what her students are doing well.

Alex: That's easy, too. (Alex talks about the students who are consistently engaged in their independent work. She names some of the same students that I have interviewed).

Stopping the conversation and asking the teacher to analyze what is working in her classroom helps her focus on her learners' strengths. It also leads to the establishment of expectations for all students based upon the behaviors of some students.

Marilyn: I came to the same conclusion about some of those same students. Let me share with you what I asked them and what they said. That might help us come up with some behaviors we want all of your students to have. I asked the students three questions: "What are you doing?, "Why are you doing it?" and "What do you expect to accomplish today?"

Let's start with Tanisha. She was reading independently when I interviewed her. I asked her what she was doing and she said, "Reading *Because of Winn Dixie*" (DeCamillo, 2000). I asked her why she was reading this book. She replied, "I like books about girls my age and dogs. My teacher told us about this book. In fact, she read some of it aloud to us and I thought I'd like it. I just started it but already I like it. I was right."

I asked her one more question: "What do you expect to accomplish today in reading?" She answered, "I want to read until I find out if the girl's dad lets her keep Winn Dixie. Did you know this dog was named for a grocery store?" She laughed.

I share a few more examples of students engaged in reading. The students make similar comments.

Marilyn: What are you thinking now?

Alex: Can I clone those kids? That's just how I would like all my students to talk about their independent reading.

Marilyn: I couldn't agree with you more. Let's figure out what they were doing. What were some of the commonalities? For instance, what expectations had they set for themselves about their reading?

Alex: Well, they all knew that they had to find a book that was interesting to them.

Marilyn: So that's one thing we have to determine. Are the disengaged kids interested in their independent reading books?

Alex: Not only interested, but are they able to read them and make meaning?

Marilyn: Why don't you take a minute and write down what you're thinking.

Stopping the conversation and asking the teacher to analyze what is working in her classroom helps her focus on her learners' strengths. It also leads to the establishment of expectations for all students based upon the behaviors of some students.

AN EXAMPLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE

I remind Alex to take a few notes so that she has something to refer back to after our dialogue is finished. I also use her notes as an assessment sample — an opportunity to confirm that she understands what I think she understands.

(Alex takes a few notes. She writes, "Students must be interested in their books and be able to make meaning from them.")

Marilyn: What else were those students doing? Remember when I asked Tanisha what she expected to accomplish today? She said, "I want to read until I find out if the girl's dad lets her keep Winn Dixie."

Alex: She was setting a goal. So what I want my students to think about is what they want to accomplish as readers. Not how many pages they'll read per day, which is what I'm having them do now. That takes very little thinking. Tanisha was thinking about what she wanted to find out as she was making her way through the beginning of *Because of Winn Dixie.*

Marilyn: This is what I hear you saying, by listening to what those kids said, you have come up with three expectations for all of your students: books that interest them; books they can read with understanding; and being able to determine what they want to accomplish as a reader to set a goal for their independent reading time. Am I right?

Alex: Yes, but I think I've told them that a bunch of times.

This is an indication to me that Alex isn't sure what to do next even if she has a clear idea of what she wants students to do. She has already exhausted all of her ideas. I think she knows more than she thinks she knows, so my task is to provide more support. I do that by making the next question more specific.

Marilyn: So let's look at the difference between telling students what to do and setting expectations for how they will do it. What might that look and sound like?

Alex: I guess my role is determining if the book they are reading is engaging and if they can read it with meaning.

Marilyn: Would you expect that to always be your role?

Alex: Well, it's probably always going to be my role to make sure it's happening, but I would sure like it if they knew how to do those things themselves.

Marilyn: I agree. I guess that's why we call it independent reading, because ultimately we want them doing this independently.

Alex: So maybe that's what I work on this week. I could be determining who is reading a book that interests them and that they can read with meaning.

Marilyn: How will you do that?

I am aware of the importance of Alex having a strategy for immediately putting into practice what we are talking about. The remainder of the dialogue is spent moving from talk to action by planning how Alex will use her time to implement this new strategy.

Alex: I guess I'll start with the students I know aren't in a book that's working and I'll try to figure out why. I can listen to them read a little bit and talk to them about why I pick certain books.

Marilyn: Let's think about your time. What will you need to do with individuals and what might you be doing with small groups or the whole group?

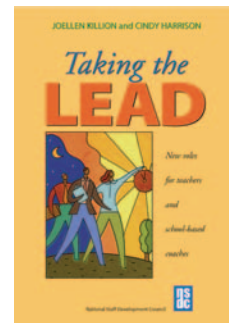
I want Alex to see that she can use her time effectively by meeting with small groups and the whole group to reach her outcomes.

Alex: I'll need to meet individually with students who don't have a book that's working, but I bet I could talk with some in small groups. I could also talk with the whole group about why I choose books to read and how I know if they are working for me.

Marilyn: Who else could share some experiences in book selection?

I'm reminding Alex that she knows another way to save instructional time. She often has students provide demonstrations.

Alex: Oh, my kids who are engaged. I could ask them the same questions you asked them, but do it in front of the whole group.



New book from NSDC for coaches

Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches
By Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison

This guide to school-based coaching is written by two educators who have developed coaching models and worked closely with dozens of coaches. They explore the complex, multifaceted roles played by teacher leaders and school-based coaches, as well as examining district and school expectations, hiring practices, and deployment of these educators.

A companion CD-ROM includes dozens of tools that teacher leaders and school-based coaches can use in their work. One of those tools is a new set of Innovation Configurations for school-based coaches. NSDC, 2006. Item B352.
Price: $36, members; $45, nonmembers

I want Alex to see that she can use her time effectively by meeting with small groups and the whole group to reach her outcomes.

AN EXAMPLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE

Marilyn: And don't forget why Tanisha decided to read *Winn Dixie*.

Alex: Yes! She wanted to read it after she heard me reading a portion to the class. I could do that with a lot of high-interest books.

Marilyn: It sounds like you have some great ideas. Let's look at how we could plan for them over the next week – what you'll do with the whole group and with individuals.

We spend the next 10 minutes planning for the week and setting out the support she might need. I bring the dialogue to closure by summarizing what has been learned, why it has been learned, and the commitment to change in practice. My goal is that Alex will implement this new learning.

Marilyn: So let's think about the steps we went through today and why. First, we talked about what your students are doing who are really engaged. What did that enable us to do?

Alex: We could figure out what we wanted all students to do.

Marilyn: Yes, we basically set expectations for independent reading. What else did we do?

Alex: We determined how to communicate those expectations to the students and planned for it.

Marilyn: Let's jot down those two steps. They seem pretty simple, and I bet we could apply them to other areas of your room once we work through independent reading.

•

Alex and I monitored the result of this dialogue. She spent the next two weeks setting expectations and providing demonstrations for the whole group. At the same time, she was collecting data about readers who were not engaged in independent reading. Eventually, all but three of her students were able to remain engaged while reading independently. Alex monitored those three students and provided additional support to increase their level of engagement.

An extra benefit of her work was the increasing fluency in her students. Because they were reading more often and for longer periods of time, they were able to read more fluently which also improved their comprehension.

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