

MIRROR, MIRROR, *in the lab*

Process shows coaches
clear reflections
of their own practices



BY DIANE SWEENEY

Susan Herll and Liz Briggs huddle at a table in the center of a nearly empty classroom in a middle school in Colorado. The room is clearly unused for student instruction. Tables are pushed against a wall, chairs are stacked, the bulletin boards are bare. It is a quiet place in the heart of a bustling middle school.

Herll and Briggs sit side by side with notebooks open on the table, a stack of student work piled between them. The two seem to have a sense of urgency to start their conversation. This weekly meeting is the only chance for this instructional coach and teacher to reflect together on student learning, teaching strategies, and future instruction. Today, they are planning a lesson that they will co-teach later in the day.

“What are you working on?” Herll asks Briggs. “What do you expect the students to learn from this lesson?”

“We’ve been working on the order of algebraic operations,” answers Briggs,

a 7th-grade math teacher. “I want the students to understand that they can’t always move from left to right when solving the problems. This is something we’ve been working on for awhile. Some kids are getting it and others aren’t.”

Herll wonders aloud, “Given our focus for today’s lesson, who do you think will most likely understand the order of operations, and how will we know?”

“I think we should collect their work and look at it afterward so we can tell what they have understood,” Briggs responds. “I’d expect about 75% to 80% of the students will get it, and I’m fairly certain I can guess who won’t.”

“That’s a great idea,” Herll agrees. “Since they’ll be working with a partner, let’s also be sure to listen to what they’re saying when they’re solving the problems. I’m wondering who you think will struggle with this assignment?”

Briggs quickly lists a handful of students she is concerned about. They agree to pay close attention to these students during the lesson and as they analyze the student work afterwards.

Herll and Briggs aren’t alone during this coaching session. Instead, they sit in the center of a group of six other observers — school-based coaches from the Denver area. The group is participating in a coaching lab, and it is Herll’s turn to demonstrate her coaching practices for colleagues to respond to and reflect upon.

Today’s focus is on questioning strategies for debriefing lessons with individual teachers, an area Herll has felt stuck on in the past. She understands that if her role is to encourage reflection among teachers, then she

must be reflective as well. It is her turn to reflect on her greatest successes and challenges as a coach. It is her turn to reflect on her own practice.

COACHING FOR COACHES

More and more, school districts are looking toward school-based coaching as a method to directly influence student learning. School-based coaches build content, leadership, and professional development capacity at the school site. They are faculty members who work alongside teachers to ensure instruction is targeted to meet student needs, is aligned with the district curriculum, and helps produce the desired student learning outcomes. A prerequisite for school-based coaches is a deep understanding of the research around high-quality instruction. They are informal leaders in their schools, and, in the end, are measured by how well they have influenced both teacher and student learning.

School-based coaches face complex challenges. The shift to teaching adults from teaching children is dramatic. Coaches are no longer closely connected to a group of students, but instead are focused on adult learning and how it impacts student learning. Many coaches are in roles that are poorly articulated, are not trained in the complexities of adult learning, or face a school culture that hasn’t been adequately prepared for this form of professional development. To meet these challenges, coaches require ongoing training and support that provides them with the opportunity to learn in the context of their real work.

THE GENESIS OF COACHING LABS

Denver Public Schools used Title I funds to provide literacy coaches in more than 100 schools labeled low-performing by state accountability measures. School-based coaches were hired from the teaching ranks. They

were typically well-respected, knew a good deal about literacy instruction, and were interested in taking on a leadership role in their schools. Very few had been coached themselves, and even fewer had coaching experience.

With additional funding from the Ford Foundation, the district targeted a feeder system of four elementary schools, two middle schools, and a high school for more intensive work. The area superintendent overseeing this feeder system hired a consultant, the author, to work with the coaches in these schools, which were some of the lowest achieving in the district. In addition to getting support for the district’s new literacy program, the coaches also needed help in related matters, such as how to spend their time, what kinds of conversations to have with teachers, how to pull in reluctant teachers, how to assess the impact of coaching on students, and other daily challenges. Their struggle was palpable.

As an outside consultant, I had to create a plan to address the task based on my belief that our best learning is accomplished within the context of real work. I imagined that observing and discussing coaching practices would engender intense learning opportunities focused on the scope and complexity of the work itself. I wanted to create an opportunity for coaches to deeply examine their coaching practice, and the first coaching lab was born.

THE PROCESS AND PROTOCOL FOR COACHING LABS

Coaching labs provide coaches with the opportunity to meet with a small group of colleagues and observe a fellow coach who acts as a lab host.

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DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW PROTOCOL

(About 45-60 minutes for five to 10 participants)

I. Set the context before the observation

- Facilitator sets the tone and shares norms for the observation.
- Lab host gives some background and frames the focus question.
- Participants ask clarifying questions.

II. Observe

A group of five to eight peer coaches observe the lab host working either individually or with a small or large group of teachers while the observing coaches take notes that are specific to the host's focus question.

III. Reflect on the coaching practice after the observation

ROUND 1: Coaching moves

- Each group member takes a turn describing what he or she saw during the observation using objective language, such as: "I saw ...," "I heard ...," "I noticed ..."
- The facilitator ensures that the comments relate to the focus question.
- The facilitator summarizes and/or charts the round, capturing important themes and ideas that emerge from the discussion. If necessary, the facilitator reminds the group what the lab host requested as an observational focus.

ROUND 2: Impact on student learning

- Each group member takes a turn describing the impact of the coaching on student learning.
- The facilitator ensures that the comments relate to the focus question.
- The facilitator summarizes and/or charts the round, capturing important themes and ideas that emerge from the discussion.

ROUND 3: Going deeper with the focus question

- The rounds continue until the facilitator is



PHOTO BY CLARISSA ROBERTS-SPROUSE

Susan Herll, second from left, leads a peer group in Colorado in reflection on coaching. From left, Lacey Myer, Herll, Tracey Reynolds, and MaryLu Hembloom.

confident that the observation has provided enough information for the lab host.

- Many times the third round is a refocus on the coach's focus question to ensure that it was discussed in depth.
- The facilitator summarizes and/or charts the round, capturing important themes and ideas that emerge from the discussion.

ROUND 4: Next steps

- The lab host responds by thinking aloud about what he or she heard and ideas he or she might try.
- Each group member states a next step in his or her own work.
- The facilitator takes notes for future support.

ROUND 5: Linger questions

- The facilitator invites group members to share lingering questions in a forum of open discussion.
- During this time, the facilitator ensures that the lab host is not the target of these questions. Rather, this is the time for everyone in the group to share their ideas, experiences, and questions.

ROUND 6: Debrief the process

- The facilitator leads a discussion around the protocol and process.

The goal of the labs is to provide coaches time to observe another's practice, as well as time for rigorous reflection. Participating coaches walk away with new ideas and tools for their own work and are able to take time in their busy professional lives to reflect.

The labs require a host who is not necessarily viewed as an expert, but as a learner willing to bring something he or she is grappling with to a group of peers. Labs also require a lab facilitator who understands how to support both the host and the observers. Finally, labs require a small group of about five to eight observers.

As the lab facilitator, I join Herll for a planning conversation a few weeks before she hosts her lab. We discuss what she is doing in her coaching work — what is going well and challenges. Herll explains that she spends a lot of her time coaching individual teachers by observing them and then debriefing with them. She feels good about her work in classrooms, but she sometimes doesn't know how to proceed after a few minutes of debriefing. She is interested in developing her repertoire of questions to encourage teachers to reflect on their practice. After the more obvious questions — “How do you think the lesson went? What will you do next?” — Herll doesn't know how to take the conversation deeper. I help Herll generate a focus question to guide her peers' observation: “How can I use reflective questioning to dig deeper in my conversations with teachers?”

During the observation, I ensure that the group stays focused on Herll's question so we maintain a climate of safety. Without a facilitator to aid in maintaining the focus, observers' own agendas might intrude on the observation, and the feedback might not provide the host with the assistance he or she is seeking.

Choosing a protocol to guide the conversation also makes the lab a safe and productive experience. We use a revised version of the descriptive review protocol (p. 40).

The lab requires a predictable process that encourages thoughtful reflection for both the participants and lab host. The process in practice has remained fairly consistent across most situations. Some labs are an observation of one-on-one coaching, while others are an observation of a coach working with a group of teachers.

Both processes involve a prebriefing session, where the facilitator sets the tone and develops norms for the observation. Then the lab host shares his or her work and poses a focus question. Finally, participants have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions of the lab host. These questions are meant to help participants understand the context of the coach's work in order to make better sense of the observation.

After the prebriefing, we observe Herll and Briggs as they plan, teach, and debrief a lesson. When the observation is complete, we debrief using the descriptive review protocol. The protocol flows from a series of rounds, each building upon the last. Observers use objective language such as, “I noticed ...,” “I observed ...,” and “I saw ...” to describe the lab host's actions during coaching.

In Herll's lab, one observer notes, “Many of your questions are focused on learning outcomes for students.” Another observes, “Susan and the teacher read through student work to determine next steps.” And, “Susan supplemented the questions by paraphrasing and clarifying throughout the conversation with the teacher.”

As the group shares, Herll listens and takes careful notes. When she and the group are ready, Herll shares her thinking about next steps for her practice. She notes that the experi-

ence with this group of peers was the most support she has ever received as a coach.

Then, because the labs are not just about providing the host with new thinking, each group member shares some next steps for his or her own practice as well. The labs help raise awareness among the observing coaches with the expectation that they will refine their own coaching practice.

“The observations demonstrated to me the power of reflecting with others,” noted a coach. “The lab structure is the method for staff development.”

WHY COACHING LABS?

Coaching labs have become a rich and relevant source of training and support for school-based coaches in Denver. In fact, district leaders are working to build the capacity to use coaching labs more extensively throughout the system. The district designated a cohort of facilitators who were trained in the lab process and effective facilitation.

Coaching labs create the opportunity for coaches to have job-embedded professional development just as teachers do. Districts as diverse as Kent and Federal Way in Washington, Sumter, S.C., and St. Joseph, Mo., have found that the lab model provides high-quality support for their coaches in a way they had never imagined.

“It was amazing to have a room full of mirrors that each reflected a different aspect of my coaching,” one participant said. “Getting multiple perspectives on what I do forced me to reflect on my practice as a whole. Coaching is a reflective process that benefits all involved.” ■

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— Lab participant