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13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

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PEER LEARNING LABS PUT TEACHER PRACTICE UNDER *the* MICROSCOPE

By Valerie von Frank

Instructional coaches in Thompson School District (Loveland and Berthoud, Colo.) have an unusual tool in their tool kits. Not quite Japanese lesson study, not quite classroom walk-through, peer learning labs are a professional learning opportunity that has evolved from coaches' and leaders' experiences.

The district began to hire instructional coaches in 2006, putting in place a part-time coach for the early childhood center and each of the 18 elementary schools and a full-time coach for each of the 10 secondary schools. District leaders went to the community for the funding, raising a special millage to support the program.

At the same time, in a partnership with the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC), a nonprofit group of business and education leaders committed to strengthening Colorado's public schools, professional learning took a new form. PEBC's staff developer began working with the instructional coach at a targeted school, and PEBC invited four teachers from the school to participate in a lab setting to observe and learn from master teachers using targeted instructional strategies. The labs required time for teachers to travel to Denver, and the district soon recognized that funding for teachers to visit off-site lab classrooms was finite. The instructional coach at that school launched an internal lab project one day a month, modeling the PEBC lab.

Learning for instructional coaches was also ramping up. The district provided Cognitive Coaching training and weekly coaches' meetings for book studies, among other support.

What's inside

NSDC tool

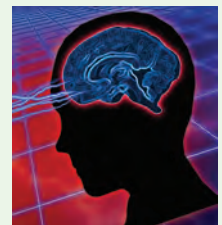
Prepare for lesson observations with a focused discussion.

Page 4

Lessons from a coach

Jason Heiser says listen to teachers and rely on a network.

Page 5



Focus on NSDC's standards

Professional learning keeps evolving through the decades.

Page 6



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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

Melding all of these methods, peer learning labs were born. While Japanese lesson study focuses on teachers honing a common lesson and classroom observations involve an observer or team looking for predetermined evidence of specific practices, peer lesson labs involve coaches helping teachers to focus on their own question of practice and then invite colleagues to their classrooms to assist in collecting data to allow the teacher to examine that question.

Examining questions of practice

Colleagues volunteer to attend the lab, the school leader provides substitute teacher time, and the group often debriefs during districtwide early-release Wednesdays, created to provide teachers with professional learning time. Peer learning labs allow teachers the opportunity to directly address a question of practice for their own learning, with support from the instructional coach.

From a seasoned teacher wondering why what he or she has done in the past is not working to improve student reading, to a young teacher figuring out what works with a hard-to-reach youngster, the peer learning lab helps teachers gather data that they can reflect on with peers to seek their own answers.

“It’s very different from bringing a group of teachers in to watch a ‘master teacher,’” said Diane Lauer, Thompson’s director of curriculum and instruction. “We didn’t want these to look, feel, or sound anything like that. These teachers have expertise, but you’re not going in to specifically learn from them because they’re masters at what they do. Participants go in knowing it’s an inquiry lab, and we’re engaging in a question that’s going to enhance the learning for that teacher. Participants observe and collect data.”

Trish Malik, who works part time as an instructional coach and also serves as the district’s coordinator of instructional coaches, said she used the lab as a teacher herself. “It helps bring clarity and helps each of us ramp up our instruction,” Malik said. She said the labs also are essential in her role as coach and coordinator: “Our job as coach is to help mediate teachers’ thinking to help them grow.”

NSDC’S BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Formulating good questions

Lauer said the labs are an iteration of Cognitive Coaching, which typically includes the planning conversation, the event, and the reflecting conversation. The instructional coaches’ training in Cognitive Coaching was essential for this work, she said. “Cognitive Coach training provides the language and the vision for how to have that coaching cycle and conversation,” Lauer said. “Coaches have the tool kit for how to help frame the questions, to paraphrase. It has been the foundation.”

During a planning conversation with the instructional coach, the teacher formulates an inquiry question — something specific about the teacher’s own instruction that he or she wants to study using data.

The instructional coach helps the teacher formulate the question and determine what data to collect. The coach also may go into the classroom to observe and get background.

“The level of questioning is deepening teachers’ understanding of content,” Lauer said.

Questions have ranged from inquiry around instructional strategies to curricular investigations.

Some examples:

- As I’m conferring with students for reader’s workshop, are other students able to stay on task?
- What does rigor look like in the classroom?
- How can I make more seamless the students’ articulation to the next grade level?

In the last case, improving grade articulation, teams of 6th-grade teachers observed 5th-grade teachers and vice versa. But generally, Lauer said, the observers cut across all content and grade levels, one of the boons of the lab experience.

“We want a cross-fertilization of ideas, people who might not be able to do the lesson but can engage in the question — what is rigor or how does that reading comprehension strategy support the content area,” said Lauer.

“It’s really about the teacher who has the question,” Malik said. “The lab is held to facilitate the teacher’s thinking around that question, not about everyone using the same lesson” as in Japanese lesson study.



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Engaging peers for assistance

Before the observation, the coach ensures that participating teachers share an understanding of the “ground rules” for the observation, such as whether teachers will help struggling students during their time in the room. If needed, the coach also might work with the group on Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman’s norms for collaboration (2009). The coach shares with the group the inquiry question and the tool for data collection, setting up, for example, a three-column notes tool. The teacher sets the time for the visit, and the group observes.

During the debriefing after the observation, the instructional coach facilitates, helping the teacher analyze the data and helping participants make connections to their own practices.

“When the coach notices a teacher wrestling with a question that could benefit from data collection, the coach could collect the data, but also could invite other teachers to do so,” said Lauer. “This creates more collegial interactions and different results than one-on-one observations by the coach. We have found this is powerful professional development for the teacher to invite other teachers

into the classroom to wrestle with a question around instruction.”

The learning labs are not a district or school requirement in any way. They begin when a teacher is willing to open her classroom and her practice in a deeper way to promote her own learning. Some schools have labs throughout the year; some may have had only a few. Others in the district may not have used the process.

Malik said labs help increase the culture of collaboration within the school, with the idea of deprivatizing practice.

“We’ve really tried to build coaches’ capacity so they have several tools to use,” Malik said. “We try to help coaches envision possible different ways to work with teachers. Peer learning labs are just another strategy.”

Reference

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (2009). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups.* (2nd ed.). Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon. ◆

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— Diane Lauer,
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District director of
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instruction

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