CONTENT-FOCUSED ROUTINES SUPPORT LEARNING FOR EVERYONE — INCLUDING COACHES
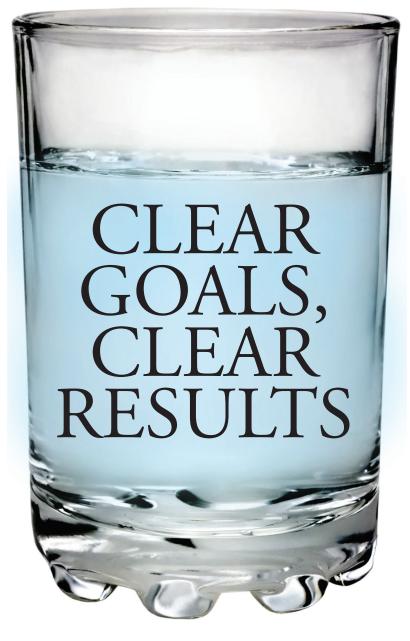
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CLEAR GOALS, CLEAR RESULTS

L earning how to give effective feedback can be a difficult task for teacher leaders. This is especially true for what is called "hard feedback"— that is, feedback that challenges the teacher's practice and therefore may cause some level of professional discomfort.

Educators at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning have developed a coaching model that eliminates the need for hard feedback. This coaching model, called content-focused coaching, sets clear expectations about outcomes for applying new pedagogical practices in the classroom, uses routines that support everyone (including the coach) as learners, and relies on cognitive tools to guide conversation and provide substantive feedback. The institute has found that content-focused coaching allows coaches to be effective without resorting to hard feedback.

And the proof is in the results: A four-year (2006-10) Institute of Education Sciences randomized control trial that tested the effectiveness of content-focused coaching showed an increase in effective literacy instruction and student achievement (Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013). Findings demonstrated that:

- 4th- and 5th-grade students in Title I schools performed better on the state achievement test than similar students in the comparison schools.

- Teachers scored higher on classroom observation measures related to the rigor and interactivity of text discussions than did teachers in the comparison schools.
- Teachers reported more intensity and variety of in-class assistance from literacy coaches than teachers in the comparison schools.

WHAT IS CONTENT-FOCUSED COACHING?

Content-focused coaching is practice-based professional learning implemented at district, school, and classroom levels. Created by the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, the program was originally used in mathematics and later adapted for use in literacy instruction.

To date, content-focused coaching has been implemented by school districts and early childhood education programs in cities across the country, including Los Angeles, California; New York, New York; Denver, Colorado; Providence, Rhode Island; Austin and El Paso, Texas; Guilford, Connecticut; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

At the district level, the institute provides intensive professional learning to literacy coaches to ensure they have a high level of pedagogical expertise and ability to work effectively with teachers. District leaders and principals also participate to create a shared vision of effective teaching and to support coaches' work with teachers.

At the school level, literacy coaches use what they learn to work with teachers in professional learning groups and individually in their classrooms.

The institute works in districts to assist current coaches and help hire new ones. A practice-based hiring kit (McCarthy, Bickel, & Artz, 2010) educates district leaders in how to clearly define the coach's role, form criteria for selecting coaches, and create an application and hiring process to attract strong candidates.

Districts decide which grade levels of teachers a coach will work with during a school year, and all teachers in that grade level work with the coach. Focusing coaches' time on a particular grade level ensures that coaches have enough time to work intensively with teachers. More importantly, focusing on particular grades — as opposed to particular teachers — promotes a culture of continuous improvement where all teachers — not just teachers who are new, seen to be struggling, or serve the lowest-performing students — participate.

The institute works with coaches and principals for two to three years. Coaches meet with teachers in grade-level teams weekly. They engage teachers in one-on-one conference cycles monthly or two to three times in a six- to eight-week period. These cycles include a preconference planning meeting; an in-classroom component that involves modeling, co-teaching, or observing teaching; and a post-conference to reflect on the lesson's impact on student learning.

During their first year, coaches learn new instructional models, which they practice and hone by teaching in front of other coaches. They become skilled lesson planners and, by working with other coaches individually and in small groups, they internalize the cognitive tools they will later use with teachers.

> **Learning how to give effective feedback can be a difficult task for teacher leaders.**

Once coaches start their work with teachers, they try out their new instructional strategies for teachers in the teachers' classrooms. Afterward, they reflect with teachers on the impact of the coach's instruction on student learning. Coaches also share with teachers the content-focused lesson plans they developed. This process establishes the coaches as master teachers and creates a learning culture where both teachers' and coaches' methods are up for reflection and analysis.

One coach said that having other coaches direct questions to him (in the lesson planning sessions) helped him by presenting issues he hadn't considered. When he ultimately met with teachers, he felt better prepared.

KEY FEATURES

So how does content-focused coaching eliminate the need for hard feedback? Here are several features that support this way of working.

Right-size the goals.

Content-focused coaching asks first that central office leaders work with principals to "right-size" the focus of the coach's work. Right-sizing means describing the goal of the coaching initiative in manageable, observable, and realistic terms, given the amount of time and effort expected from all role groups (principals, coaches, and teachers). In the Institute of Education Sciences study, this meant focusing on improving 4th- and 5th-grade students' reading comprehension by learning to engage students in rigorous, text-based discussions of worthy texts using open-ended, text-based questioning to support meaning-making.

Establish clear expectations.

Institute fellows work with teachers, principals, and key central office leaders to develop a common vision of the pedagogical practices, along with clear criteria for evaluation. In the Institute for Education Sciences study, the instructional practice was the Questioning the Author (Beck & McKeown, 2006) approach to text discussion, which was distilled into a set of guidelines. These guidelines form the criteria for fair and credible self-, peer, and coach evaluation of the new practice. (See text discussion guidelines at right.)

Model receiving feedback.

Coaches model pedagogical practices for teachers, who learn to take descriptive, nonjudgmental notes on what they see and hear the coach do and say that adheres to text discussion guidelines.

During repeated opportunities to observe these teaching models, teachers record evidence illustrating what the coach did that meets one or more of the criteria in the guidelines (e.g. Marilyn stopped reading in the middle of a paragraph to ask the students, "How does what we just learned in this passage fit with what we said before?") and think about the lesson's impact on student learning. Afterward, teachers discuss what they observed, using the evidence they wrote

GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNING TEXT DISCUSSIONS OF LITERARY AND INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

BASED ON THE QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR APPROACH

Components	Approach
Texts	Select texts that contain a sufficient range of complexities to provide grist for students to build meaning.
Major understandings	Decide on the major ideas to be developed by students about the text. Where? How? By whom?
Challenges to comprehension	Determine where inferences are needed, where abstract language is used, where transitions are omitted or ineffective, how the text structure may pose difficulty.
Text segments	Decide where to stop to initiate discussion.
Initial queries	Intersperse open-ended questions during the first reading (rather than saving them until the end). Use questions that require students to describe and explain text ideas, rather than recall and retrieve words from text.
Desired student responses	Determine in advance the desired student responses that signal comprehension, and use them as the road map for the conversation.
Follow-up questions	Use questions that encourage student elaboration and development of ideas; listen carefully to student responses and take these into account when formulating follow-up questions; scaffold students' thinking.
Illustrations	In general, if there are illustrations, present them after students have heard and responded to the related section of text.
Background knowledge	Use invitations for background knowledge judiciously to support meaning building but not to encourage students to tap into tangential experiences.
Vocabulary	Select some sophisticated words for direct attention after reading and discussion of the story are completed.

down, rather than merely stating unsupported opinions.

When coaches teach in front of others first, they demonstrate a willingness to be in the vulnerable position of the observed before taking on the role of observer. This lays the groundwork for a collegial and trusting relationship between teacher and coach that positions the coach as a thinking and discussion partner for teachers rather than as a judge of teacher performance.

Once teachers observe and give sub-stantive feedback to the coach, they are more willing to present their practice to others and to listen to what others have to say about improving their practice.

Combine group learning and one-on-one coaching.

Content-focused coaching uses a gradual release of responsibility framework (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Coaches first provide teachers with video and live teaching models, then guided practice opportunities, and finally independent appli-

LEARNING LAB: REFLECTION ROUNDS

T eachers take descriptive notes as they observe a fellow (host) teacher teaching students. Participants provide substantive feedback about something they saw or heard the host teacher do that aligns with the practice under study and its impact on student learning.

REFLECTION ONE: EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

LEARNERS

Use observation notes to address questions such as:
- What specific responses did students make that are:
    - Evidence of their understanding of the intended learning?
    - Evidence of misunderstandings or confusions?
    - Evidence of the impact of certain instructional moves?
- What might be the next learning for these students?

HOST TEACHER:

Reflect on evidence of student learning using experience teaching the lesson, knowledge of student strengths and needs, progress over time, classroom dynamics, etc.
- Respond or not to any of the questions posed for reflection or clarification.

REFLECTION TWO: EVIDENCE OF TEACHER LEARNING AROUND FOCUS QUESTION

LEARNERS:

Use observation notes to address questions such as:
- What did you see or hear the teacher or students say or do relative to the teacher's focus question?
- What questions do you have that might prompt reflection?

HOST TEACHER:

Use experience teaching this lesson to clarify or provide additional context based on the learners' reflections.
- Respond or not to any of the questions posed for reflection or clarification.

REFLECTION THREE: COMMITMENT AND ACTION STEPS

LEARNERS AND HOST TEACHER REFLECT:

- What was new learning for me about our learning focus question?
- How did this observation deepen my understanding?
- How did this observation challenge my thinking?
- What are the implications of this observation for my practice?
- What additional professional learning do I need to support or sustain the instructional practices observed in my school?
- What should our next learning be to build on this experience?

REFLECTION FOUR: LESSON OBSERVATION PROCESS

LEARNERS AND HOST TEACHER REFLECT:

Was this lesson observation a useful professional learning opportunity? Why or why not?
- In what ways was the reflection process meaningful? How could the process be improved?
- How and when will we revisit our learning from this observation?

cation (one-on-one coaching) in the classroom with substantive coach feedback. After refining their understanding of the practice with their coach, teachers teach a lesson in front of their peers. Through these steps, teachers move from awareness of a new approach to instructing students independently.

Use routines and cognitive tools.

One routine developed to support this vision of professional learning is the Learning Lab, in which teachers from the same school or across schools who teach the same content take notes while observing a fellow (host) teacher instruct students.

EVIDENCE-BASED REASONING TOOL

THIS TOOL LENDS STRUCTURE TO PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS.

Participants:

- Name what they saw or heard;
- Identify how it aligns with/illustrates something they've been studying;
- Say what this seems to indicate in terms of teacher or student learning; and
- Raise questions/comments about what they saw or heard.

1 Observations	2 Analysis	3 Interpretation of cause and effect	4 Questions or suggestions
I SAW OR I HEARD: • The teacher provided a lot of information to students about the text they were about to read. • Bella said, "I'm not sure that's right. Can we look at that again?"	THIS SEEMS TO BE EVIDENCE OF: • The teacher is trying to build background knowledge. • Students' commitment to accuracy.	THIS LEADS ME TO THINK THAT: • The teacher is trying to support student learning by scaffolding their reading. • Students have internalized the norms for classroom discussion.	I WONDER: • Was this necessary or could they have determined some of this information for themselves while reading? • What did this teacher do to support students to take on this role for themselves?

In a prescribed, round-robin sequence (see Learning Lab: Reflection Rounds on p. 37), teachers provide substantive feedback to the host teacher (after students leave) — specific, descriptive comments using the previously discussed criteria for effective implementation of the pedagogical practice — about something they saw or heard their peer do that aligns with the practice under study and its impact on student learning.

The Evidence-Based Reasoning Tool (see above) shapes the substantive feedback to the host teacher in the Learning Lab. It lends structure to participants' comments by asking them to describe what they saw or heard, identify how this aligns with or illustrates something they have been studying as a group, say what this seems to indicate in terms of teacher or student learning, and finally, raise questions or comments about what they saw or heard.

These tools reduce a teacher's anxiety about teaching in front of peers because they focus feedback on specific agreed-upon evidence/criteria, ensuring that judgments and evaluative language don't overshadow an analysis of teaching and learning.

Ideally, when professional learning communities are established and active, teachers can be both observer and observed, and the professional learning community becomes a venue for ongoing collaborative learning.

Using these cognitive tools and routines eliminates the need for hard feedback from coaches. It puts coaches and teachers on more equal footing and makes feedback about teaching more palatable because it is focused squarely on the very specific pedagogical practices they have been studying as a group and practicing independently and with the coach. The criteria establish clear expectations, and the evaluation by peers and coach is fair and credible.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

A midsized urban school district used this learning sequence recently with its 9th-grade English language arts teachers. Teachers attempting new pedagogies struggled with how to be faithful to the design while adjusting it to fit student needs. The lab structure allowed a volunteer host teacher to explain how she used the institute's curricular materials with her class.

Here are observations from teachers who participated.

- "Teacher and coach organized feedback thematically and responded with thoughts for further reflection and practice. I saw an immediate problem-solving approach to feedback."
- "When [the teacher] was talking about giving kids more space so they could take more ownership over their learning … it seemed that maybe [the teacher] came to a realization about that from what we said."
- "I feel that the Learning Lab did help support our previous professional development, as we had the opportunity to see much of what we discussed in theory actually put into practice. Seeing how [the teacher] took the lesson and crafted it to fit her classroom and teaching style showed me that there is a little flexibility for me to make this lesson fit my teaching style."

COACHES AS VALUED FACULTY MEMBERS

Rather than altering power relations and learning how to give hard feedback, coaches need school administrators who communicate publicly agreed-upon evidence for student outcomes and right-sized, clear expectations for pedagogical practices. Administrators also need to position coaches as valued

faculty members on whom teachers can and should rely (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009).

When used regularly within professional learning communities, routines such as the Learning Lab, which focuses on agreed-upon criteria for evidence of teacher and student learning, along with tools like the Evidence-Based Reasoning Tool, which reshapes the conversation, making everyone a learner, establish the conditions necessary for improved teaching.

Content-focused coaching helps create these conditions by enacting effective coaching and opening dialogue among teachers. Teachers, as informed peers, can then contribute to each other's learning, enhancing their own professional development and expanding their ability to raise student achievement levels.

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What we learned from a tomato

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ments such as, "It could be a little bit trickier, but it may be rewarding." She then added a few specific points of rationale as interest was building.

These subtle and judicious applications of pressure provided just enough stretch to help teachers grow beyond their existing visions of practice while not demanding so much as to close off communication or create resistance. She confronted gaps without being confrontational. She intentionally and carefully pursued opportunities to help teachers improve the design of project lessons and address important learning goals.

INQUIRY AND EXPERTISE

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) write that "knowledge of practice" is generated "when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time as they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation" (p. 250). This case study provides a concrete example of that convergence between well-structured collaborative teacher inquiry and well-timed, purposeful involvement of outside expertise.

Changes in instructional plans documented in this example would be unlikely to occur without this combination. The research fellow's facilitative actions serve as a useful example for other coaches and experts working to foster expanded visions of teaching and learning.

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