



# Becoming a teacher again made me a better coach

BY ASHLY SKIFFINGTON

**A**t the start of the 2020-21 school year, six months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed all our lives, I and the other instructional coaches in my district were temporarily reassigned to virtual teaching positions.

Because families could choose to

enroll their child in either distance learning or in-person learning, we needed more staff to fill teaching roles or step in for teachers who chose not to return to the classroom. I found myself teaching again, but in a way I had never envisioned — through a computer screen.

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virtual format stretched my capacity and challenged some of my beliefs about curriculum and instruction. It also taught me a lot about the kinds of support teachers need and opportunities for me to provide it.

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compassion for those I serve. Becoming a teacher again has made me a better, more reflective coach.

Based on my recent teaching experience, I have made several changes that follow three big lessons that can be valuable for other coaches: Embrace a minimalist approach, embody a coaching mindset and a coaching culture, and establish an optimal learning environment.

Although the pandemic has created stress and engendered disillusionment, it has also created opportunities to do things differently, and these strategies can help us seize those opportunities.

### **EMBRACE A MINIMALIST APPROACH TO COACHING**

Returning to the classroom inspired me to take a more minimalist approach to coaching than I had used

before. A minimalist approach to coaching isn't about doing less. It's about being strategic and thoughtfully differentiating professional learning experiences.

While I was teaching virtually, I became keenly aware that I needed shorter, more frequent planning and reflection opportunities. I wanted to streamline my planning, try new things, analyze their effectiveness, and feel empowered by my decisions to keep going or change course, and I wanted the professional support I received to reflect those goals.

Now that I have returned to coaching, those goals and needs I felt in the classroom are at the forefront of my work with principals, teachers, paraeducators and the growing cohort of teacher leaders in my district. Specifically, I aim to do the following:

- **Remove obstacles.** Suspend the urge to do more. Reflect on what's working and where opportunities for improvement exist. Removing the obstacles is far more powerful than putting more energy into the initiative (Nordgren, 2021).
- **Dedicate time for unlearning.** Unlearning is about ridding ourselves of old ideas and ineffective instructional practices. When needed, structured opportunities for unlearning can be a good investment because it creates space for new ideas to grow and prosper.
- **Make learning goals visible.** Goal-setting is crucial for both the team and the individual. Teams who align their

personalized learning goals with clearly defined student outcomes experience more success.

- **Be intentional.** Striving to get more out of doing less allows space for innovation. Clear goals coupled with intentional learning practices give adults more room to thrive.

At their core, these strategies are about helping teachers and other educators set aside the need for “rightness” and instead lean into the messy, creative, and rewarding work of teaching.

### EMBODY A COACHING MINDSET AND A COACHING CULTURE

Stepping back into the classroom taught me that strong coaching models are built from the inside out and one size doesn’t fit all. Coaching programs should assist teachers in determining their own paths forward and implementing next steps in a meaningful and autonomous way. This process creates stronger, more self-directed practitioners (Costa et al., 2016).

Recently, my team and I learned Cognitive Coaching, an approach designed to help teachers explore their thinking and encourage them to tap into their internal resourcefulness. The learning revealed that on some level I had already been applying many elements of this work with my students.

As a mathematics teacher, I knew that a well-crafted question forces students to look inward. But as a coach, I was learning how to connect these skills and provide better support for adults to arrive at their own conclusions. Going back into the classroom reminded me that assisting others to think for themselves is the cornerstone of any coaching approach because it empowers adult learners to take action geared at effecting long-term changes in their practice.

Part of finding our way and empowering change in ourselves and the teachers we work with is embracing a growth mindset. As a coach, I knew

how important a growth mindset is to transforming teaching practices. But as a teacher, I was struggling to keep that in perspective while I felt like a beginner again.

I began to look inward toward my coach training and outward to my colleagues for the support I needed, not just to survive the school year, but thrive as an educator. I realized that everyone can benefit from becoming a beginner again because it empowers us to seek constant improvement and strengthens the connection among organizational goals, ground-level initiatives, and individual growth.

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As organizational researcher Francesca Gino has written, “People perform at their best not because they’re specialists, but rather because their depth of skill is accompanied by intellectual curiosity that leads them to keep exploring” (Gino, 2020).

Based on my experience in the classroom, I recommend coaches do the following to cultivate a coaching mindset and a culture that lifts up coaching:

- **Embrace being a beginner again.** Leaders should never become divorced from the profession they are leading. To understand the experiences of others and provide effective coaching opportunities, we must always remain willing to step back to where we once were. Growth is a journey, not a destination.
- **Establish protected time for coaching.** Instructional teams have a lot to discuss when they come together for collaboration, and it can feel overwhelming at times. Dedicated time for coaching conversations is vital

for making sure manageable, high-leverage ideas and teaching practices are exchanged.

- **Leverage peer coaching.** Peer coaching raises teacher efficacy and will emerge organically when a culture of coaching and professional improvement is foundational to the structure of an organization. When coaching is available to everyone at any time, a commitment to collective growth spreads. Improvement conversations shift outward and stronger, more collaborative teams are built.
- **Involve everyone.** Coaching is not a singular experience, nor should it be reserved for one singular group of people. It’s an approach that has the power to increase the cognitive performances and decision-making skills of all members of the educational community.

### ESTABLISH AN OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As we finally, after two years of virtual meetings, begin to return to in-person collaborations, it is important that learning systems support teachers’ comprehensive professional wellness by facilitating connections among teachers. Those connections are some of the things many of us needed most during pandemic teaching.

I believe we do this by investing in a creative approach to structuring teacher collaboration time in a way that honors important brain research about learning. For example, research by Jo Boaler, education author and professor of mathematics at Stanford University, suggests that connection and collaboration are indispensable keys to learning that collaborative problem-solving is vital “for brain development, and for creating equitable outcomes” (Boaler, 2019).

Coaches can build collaborative learning environments with the following structures and routines:

- **Learning spaces.** The physical design of collaboration spaces within a school, department, or central office can play an important role in uplifting a culture of coaching and increase professional learning outcomes. These spaces should be designed with adults in mind. They should be well-organized, inviting, and provide a sense of separation from the competing stimuli of the profession. Additionally, professional resources and job tools should be centrally located and easily accessible.
- **Collaboration schedules.** Protected time for individuals or teams to gather, discuss, and construct new learning with their coach is essential. Helping school leaders prioritize and structure this time takes coordination and commitment. A powerful first step in this process may be to conduct a time audit. By getting a clearer picture of what goes into the daily business of teaching, we can remove obstacles and position professional learning as a strategy for enhancing professional wellness and overall job satisfaction.
- **Routines and protocols.** Effective professional learning communities begin by co-creating norms, designing student-centered agendas, and engaging in clearly defined routines and protocols. Routines provide predictability, and protocols can be used to foster a supportive and fun learning environment. Coaches and school leaders must be intentional about infusing adult social and emotional learning opportunities into carefully crafted collaboration time.
- **Transparency and communication.** For everyone to take advantage of

coaching's benefits, educators need to understand why it can transform their practice. Dynamic opportunities for coaching — such as collegial coaching, leadership coaching, community coaching, and meta coaching (coaching for coaches) — increase coaching's impact by extending its reach to all facets of the organization, elevating individuals and strengthening connections across a school or district.

### KEEPING PACE WITH LEARNING

The landscape of education is evolving at a fast pace, and all educators must keep up and adapt by frequently shifting our lenses and changing perspectives. Career-long coaching is paramount for making those shifts and for organizational success — a fact that became especially clear to be when I returned to teaching without the benefit of a coach.

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Even though I'm back in my role as an elementary mathematics instructional coach, a lot remains unfamiliar this year. The pandemic has challenged us, but it has also encouraged us to reach within our school resources to enhance our professional growth in the service of student success.

Reflecting on my teaching and coaching experiences has given me a new perspective about what it means to be a learning leader. I work

daily to honor and implement what I've learned over the past two years through a structured, responsive, and compassionate approach to coaching that elevates and empowers the teachers I work with.

But I also recognize that long-term organizational growth comes from nurturing a learning system from the inside out and by communicating and supporting an adult-centered approach to coaching for all.

From the designers of teacher preparation programs to our elected boards of education members, school systems have a responsibility to ensure that we are working in concert with one another to recruit, train, develop, and retain quality educators who contribute to a culture of coaching.

Because teacher quality is the most important factor in student achievement, an ongoing commitment to dynamic professional growth models that centralize coaches as learning partners becomes the catalyst for improved student outcomes.

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