



COACH'S NOTEBOOK

Kathy Perret

LIKE GARDENERS, COACHES PLANT THE SEEDS — FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

As in tending a garden, coaching involves closely and frequently observing the growing buds. In classrooms, those buds are students.

I enjoy caring for my garden and aim to learn something new each year. This summer, my primary focus was growing vegetables and flowers from seeds for the first time. Planting seeds and watching them grow was an invigorating process. I celebrated and enjoyed each new stage of the transformation. I was amazed by how the tiniest seeds transformed into unique plants — especially my sunflowers that towered over my garage.



As I observed my garden's growth while drinking my morning coffee each day, I pondered the similarities between instructional coaches and gardeners. As a

coach, I strive to sow the seeds of knowledge, cultivate an environment of growth, offer personalized support that meets unique needs and conditions, and appreciate the blooms that emerge.

Here are some of the strategies I use in both gardening and coaching that could help you plant your metaphorical seeds and nurture them to optimal growth.

SCATTER SEEDS

One of my favorite children's books is *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney. The narrator tells the story of a librarian named Alice Rumphius who had three lifelong goals: travel to faraway places, live by the sea, and do something to make the world more beautiful. To accomplish the third goal, she decided to spread lupine seeds wherever she walked. But a bad back forced her to stop spreading her seeds. Yet, to her surprise, others (including birds and the wind) continued the process for her and helped her make the world more beautiful.

Like Miss Rumphius, good coaches scatter seeds wherever and however they can. For example, when I was a school-based coach, I sent a weekly newsletter as a seed for sparking interest and initiating coaching cycles. I followed four key principles with the acronym FACE: **f**requency so that teachers came to expect it and looked forward to the tips; **a**udience tailoring to help teachers discover how they might use coaching; **c**ontent that was practical and aligned with school goals and student needs and provided food for thought; and **e**ase of creation and use through a streamlined template that made it feasible to drop in new ideas as they came to me.

TEND THE BUDS

As in tending a garden, coaching involves closely and frequently observing the growing buds. In classrooms, those buds are students. In coaching, I've found it effective to center our attention on students and whether they are growing as teachers aim for them to do. This helps to dispel the unfortunate belief among many that coaching is a way to "fix" teachers.

An effective coaching cycle begins with observing and listening to gather information that reflects the current classroom situation to guide teachers' goal-setting. Coaches can help teachers gather this information by observing. For instance, a teacher might be interested in assessing how often students participate in class, and a coach can gather this information using simple tallies.

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catalyze the next iteration of a change. They will use change management tools and resources that help leaders create effective professional learning policies and in the service of improved teaching practices and changes in student learning and achievement. Resources such as *The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning* (Short & Hirsh, 2022), the network’s research and tools, and Learning Forward tools aligned to Standards for Professional Learning will undergird participants’ learning.

Districts in the network will:

- Share promising practices that

support curriculum-based professional learning.

- Co-produce solutions regarding the implementation of high-quality instructional materials.
- Network with role-alike professionals and gain additional perspectives to support teacher teams and student outcomes.
- Gain additional perspectives on challenges and opportunities.

By working collaboratively, sharing knowledge, and engaging together in learning and problem-solving, they will make progress on a shared problem of practice to improve student learning in

math through the combination of high-quality curriculum and high-quality teaching practices that are aligned to it.

REFERENCES

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Coaches can also encourage and support teachers to collect the data. For example, to foster a holistic approach beyond data that can be quantified, I’ve encouraged teachers to collect open-ended responses from students at the end of a lesson, such as asking them to write about what they learned.

Observing and collecting data allows us to understand the buds we are tending and what they need so we can tailor our efforts to improve engagement and comprehension and help students blossom.

INVITE OTHERS TO HELP SPREAD SEEDS

As Miss Rumphius discovered, even dedicated gardeners can use a little help. Some of my most successful coaching cycles started with others planting the initial seeds. For example, a supportive school principal I worked with understood coaching and embodied many of its principles when working with teachers. Because he deeply understood each teacher’s goals, he could provide them with various options for the next steps, including

highlighting how my coaching could support them in achieving their goal. Teachers, recognizing the value of this guidance, soon realized that working with a coach was like having a skilled gardener by their side. It became evident that coaching was a time-saving approach, sparing them the effort of figuring things out independently and instead nurturing their growth efficiently.

NURTURE, DON'T CONTROL

One of the valuable lessons I learned early in my coaching journey was understanding that my role wasn’t to force teachers into teaching the way I did. Like a unique plant, each teacher possesses their strengths and challenges, and they need different supports and nutrients to nurture students in their distinctive manner. When I shifted my approach from “here is something I did” to focusing on the teacher and their specific circumstances with students, coaching became a more meaningful and appreciated practice.

And, as in a garden, we can’t control the outcome — we can only

provide the care and attention that maximize the chances of growth. I discovered that coaching thrives when it is a natural response to a recognized need. Teachers benefit most when they willingly embrace coaching because they understand its value.

Instead of rushing toward the teachers I initially thought needed improvement, I started seeking out those teachers who were eager to grow. Interestingly, this approach often led to indirect seed planting, as other teachers observed the positive outcomes of our collaborative work and became interested in participating.

With these tips in mind, being an instructional coach can be very similar — and similarly rewarding — to being a gardener. It involves focusing on growth and progress, nurturing the growing process with care and attention, adapting to the evolving landscape, learning from challenges and unsuccessful experiments, practicing patience, and celebrating successes.

Let’s plant the seeds of success together, and may this year’s harvest be bountiful and fulfilling for all. ■