



The Instructional Coach

Crafting the perfect learning triangle is the work of Sarah Powley. To see how she uses The Learning Triangle to coach teachers, go to the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 18 or scan the QR Code in the book.

Athletes—including the very best—use coaches regularly to improve their performance. Surgeons bring coaches into the operating room to observe them as they work and offer suggestions for perfecting their technique. Social service agencies employ coaches to help case workers develop communication skills, especially with difficult clientele. In schools, coaches serve a variety of purposes.

Sometimes we are called literacy coaches. In that case, we work with teachers to develop instructional strategies vis-a-vis reading and writing in all the disciplines. Sometimes we are called curriculum coaches, and then the focus is on the district's learning goals and standardized assessments of those goals. We might be called technology coaches—where the emphasis is on the obvious. Or, we are called instructional coaches—and then it's all about what happens in the classroom. The truth is, most of us do some of all of this. The name doesn't matter. We know what we do, and what we can do.

But often, the classroom teacher isn't certain what our role is or could be. Coaching is still relatively new and teachers aren't used to built-in support systems.

The last time most of us had any help in the classroom was during our student teaching experience. For some, that may not have been a productive experience. Whether the student teacher is cut loose and expected to sink or swim, or guided skillfully in an orchestrated co-teaching environment—or experiences something in between—the fact is, the status of a student teacher is just that: student. Novice, beginner, apprentice, neophyte. The relationship is unbalanced: the cooperating teacher is the old pro, and the student teacher is the greenhorn. The one tells the other what to do.

The relationship between a teacher and an instructional coach is much different. The coach is a colleague and a peer. The teacher is a professional and an equal. It's the teacher's classroom, not the coach's, and the coach is invited to interact—by the teacher.

Oh, sure, sometimes the principal has expectations that his or her staff will use the coach, and sometimes the principal is even more directive than that, but in the end, the teacher invites the coach into the room and into the relationship.

But what can a teacher ask a coach to do?

To answer that question, I thought about how I would have used me at various times during my own career.

In the beginning, I sure could have used help organizing my classroom. It took me a long time to develop systems for collecting papers, storing them, returning them. I needed a template for putting assignments on the board and a system for conveying missed information and assigning make-up work to kids who were absent. I even needed help with room arrangements. I didn't have the backlog of experience that would have told me how to break up cliques without making kids mad and how to move a student's seat without giving him (or her) an audience.

At the start of my career, I could have used a coach to help me put a lesson together. I'd have an idea of what I wanted to communicate, but I didn't have a repertoire of activities to draw upon. I could have used someone

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simply to help me plan a lesson, a week of instruction, a whole unit. To help me see the flow of instruction over a semester's time. To set goals. To develop activities to communicate those goals. To plan tests to measure how well the students had learned. Really. None of that came easily in the beginning.

I could have benefitted from having a coach watch me teach and make suggestions about pacing, about questioning techniques, about checking for understanding. It's true that I figured things out on my own—eventually—but a good coach could have kick-started that process and made me a better teacher, faster.

Shoot. I could have used a coach's help in planning and delivering lessons right up to the end of my time in the classroom. Not because I was bad, but because I wanted to be better.

As time went along and I grew more comfortable with planning and delivery, I could have used an extra set of eyes—not on me, but on the kids. Someone to watch social interactions—in some cases, to identify the primary troublemaker. I remember the frustration of knowing a group of kids was cutting up when my back was turned—but turning in time to see only the last participant, not the instigator. I could have used an extra set of ears: someone to listen for the under-the-breath remark that would tell me a student didn't understand but wouldn't ask a question. So many times I could have used an extra set of hands—whenever I put kids in groups, whenever I wanted to conference with students individually, whenever I set up learning stations—another teacher in the room would have been a boon.

And I could have used a shoulder to cry on. The relationship with a coach is a confidential one. We listen. We don't take sides. If we can, we offer suggestions.

I would have loved, loved, loved to co-teach with a coach. Once, I had a paraprofessional in my classroom who was more like a co-teacher than an aide for one of my students. We dialogued about content with the kids as our audience—delivered a relaxed, two-person lecture, really.

Other times, she'd ask a question that would prompt me to clarify a point. Once we even planned a tag-team presentation. Now that I've been a coach and had the opportunity to co-teach with colleagues, I know I would do it myself whenever I could. Sure, it takes planning—you have to meet and discuss the objectives, plan the activities and decide who's going to do what, figure out how to assess what the students have learned—but you have to do that anyway. It's more productive with a colleague because two heads on a topic are usually better than one—brainstorming and piggybacking on each other's ideas usually yields rich discussion in the classroom. The same is true with lesson planning.

Co-teaching would have built my confidence when I was a novice, but I would have thrived on it as a veteran.

I could have used someone to help me make sense of standardized test data. Someone to research topics for me. Someone to look for alternative titles for theme-based units.

In short, a coach's job is to make a teacher's job easier. Whether that is doing research, co-teaching a lesson, refining a strategy, figuring out technology, solving a problem, or working with kids, coaches are there to help.

We don't have all the answers—but we do have the time to find answers to your questions. We're not outside experts, not even consultants. We're teachers—just like you—but teachers without our own classrooms. Invite us into yours.

Sarah Powley