A case study in coaching: Enhancing professional knowledge

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Modified professional practice is a challenge for many schools. One way of achieving this is through a professional learning program that includes coaching. This paper describes the use of coaching in a professional learning program.

Case study: Coaching a school to improve how well it takes account of the literacy needs of its students.

School and faculties frequently decide to pursue a strategy or initiative as a whole-school or department-wide goal. In this case study a secondary college, aware of the influence of literacy factors on the learning success of its students, decided to optimise their literacy capacities by increasing staff knowledge of literacy processes in a range of relevant areas.

Introducing the coaching approach.

The project required staff learning in a range of areas. Earlier professional development of the expository-lecture type had demonstrated literacy procedures to the staff as a whole and shown what might be possible. Staff at the time judged many of these as useful but had not implemented them. They needed the opportunity to proceduralise it, link it with other new procedures and ones they used and to contextualise it in their teaching. The coaching was intended to achieve these purposes.

Coaching in a school or a large institution to change ways of thinking, attitudes and practise of a number of individuals requires multi-layered coaching. As well as coaching in literacy practice, the dispositions of some staff were that literacy teaching was not relevant to their KLA. For these staff attitudinal coaching was also needed.

Institutional change needs learning at a number of levels. Following discussion with the leadership team in the school, it was decided that the coaching program would target change at the faculty, department, or KLA level because this was the organisational teaching unit in the school. All staff belonged to at least one KLA.

The goals of the coaching: Not surprisingly, the program had multi-layered goals;

• the school developed a set of institutional goals for enhancing literacy knowledge in the school. To identify the goals at this level, the question What literacy capacities will the institution be fostering? was examined.

• the administration of the school had a set of goals oriented to supporting and resourcing the literacy initiative in a range of ways.

• each KLA had a set of goals for enhancing literacy knowledge in that KLA.

1 A version of this paper was published in Munro, J. (2000). Coaching in Educational Contexts. Jolimont, VIC: IARTV.
• each teacher had a set of goals for implementing literacy issues in instruction. These goals didn't match necessarily the goals of the KLA/s to which the teacher belonged.

To identify the goals of the coaching at the staff member and KLA levels, the staff examined two related questions: If the coaching is successful, what will

• students be doing more effectively than now ?
• teachers be doing ? What teaching procedures are most likely to lead to optimal literacy processing ?

Existing knowledge of the staff  To get an estimate of existing staff literacy knowledge, staff self-audited their knowledge. This was used to collate the literacy knowledge of each KLA.

Mapping a pathway  Coaching pathways were developed at each level of program implementation:

• an institutional action plan and pathway that examined issues such as
  • developing, implementing and monitoring a literacy policy,
  • how individual teacher growth would be fostered, how feedback would be provided
  • providing opportunities for KLA teams to plan ahead and to consolidate,
  • teaching KLA managers to manage teaching and to coach staff and manage the development of knowledge in their KLA.

• a plan for each KLA, specifying how it will achieve its goals

• an action plan for each staff member, indicating that teacher's literacy responsibility

• a pathway for each KLA leader; this included a plan
  • to coach staff to accept the need to change and to teach explicit literacy knowledge in KLA subjects.
  • to manage the development of literacy knowledge in KLA.
  • to coach staff in working co-operatively in relation to literacy

The coaching program

At the KLA level: In group coaching sessions KLA leaders:

• discussed the overall plan and negotiated preferred outcomes for their KLA.
• implemented collaborative literacy projects for all staff in the KLA.

Each KLA group 'unpacked' its project in terms of
• how it will be achieved, its plan, structure and roles of staff. Staff formed peer coaching pairs. Each pair researched and developed teaching procedures for one aspect.

• how it will be taught, progress monitored and time constraints considered.

• how its effectiveness would be assessed in terms of changes in student and staff knowledge re literacy. Peer coaching pairs develop easy-to-use procedures for keeping track of their changes in literacy knowledge.

• how the KLA will share with all staff the development and literacy outcomes of its project.

Each KLA leader was coached in aspects of managing the project, strategies for coaching the KLA group and individuals. Practical difficulties that might arise in early development of the project were identified and procedures for solving/ circumventing them in the KLA group were examined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What would you see as useful ground rules for us to use to manage the coaching?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you see as your desired solution or outcome? How broad and diffuse is it? What are specific, measurable goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impression of how person thinks strategically? Evidence from recent thinking re style of thinking?</td>
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<td>Self concept as a thinker?</td>
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<td>Any examples of your creative tension for achieving the goals.</td>
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<td>What you know about the project already? What planning have you done? What will you plan to do next? collaborative planning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing knowledge stored in experiences and images</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>How have you thought through the issues so far in contextualised ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing knowledge stored in procedures</td>
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<td>Existing knowledge stored in verbal forms?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have you thought through issues in analytic ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have you thought through issues in global ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is your pathway to the outcomes.</td>
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<td>What are observable indicators?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where have you come from?</td>
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<td>How do you see yourself making progress?</td>
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What does a trained coach bring to coaching in this context? These skills include

- understanding of learning, both for students learning literacy and for the professional learning of staff. The coach can take account of individual differences in staff learning, how it can be developed in particular contexts and ways for monitoring change in learning.
- assisting coachees to ‘think bigger’ and to stay focused on the professional learning. Part of this involves the coach assisting staff to interpret issues in student learning outcomes in terms of literacy learning and teaching.
- manipulating and managing motivational aspects of learning, ensuring staff members remain motivated to achieve professional learning outcomes.
- a team approach to learning brings enhanced accountability into the picture. This is critical for professional learning.
- understanding how to work together as a team, collaboratively, with focus on the school’s desires, values and goals.

In summary, the case study shows how professional learning can be enhanced through explicit and directed professional coaching.