

A mentoring and coaching approach to staff development

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Key Points

- Joint practice development through mentoring and coaching
 - Teachers and practitioners are supported to reflect on their own practice
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Purpose

What were your reasons for doing this development work?

The purpose of Mentoring-Coaching at Swiss Cottage is to develop practice. Our approach is a reflective and questioning process that supports the teacher to develop key areas of teaching and learning through their own reflection. There is a notion that someone can observe from their perspective, whatever their level of expertise, and provide judgements that are left with the teacher; but our approach is to facilitate thoughtful reflection and prompt developmental thinking within the teacher's own mind, in a spirit of collaboration and respect. Over time builds up a relationship, a level of respect, equality, and a recognition of what to take away to further in the classroom.

Only 2 ½ years ago our school merged with another, and 100 staff were new to the school, so we needed to develop our own culture in a very short time. Mentoring-Coaching was part of that and started straight off in September 2012. We had been trialling it for a number of years before that.

Who were the identified target learners?

All staff and pupils.

What specific curriculum area did you intend to have impact on?

The whole curriculum.

How were you intending to improve pupil learning?

Through improving teaching and learning practice.

What were your success criteria?

- Maintenance of our high standards of teaching and learning
- Keeping our outstanding OFSTED status

Methodology

What did you do - what teaching approaches did you use?

Every teacher has a mentoring-coaching observation once a term, but they can (and do) request a pre-lesson discussion when they wish. Not only teachers but HLTAs and TAs, too. Currently mentor-coaches work in pairs, to support whole-school monitoring-evaluation and to strengthen the observation skills of the leadership team. It was a 3-year plan to build mentoring-coaching dialogues in the leadership team by giving all middle leaders the experience of observing with others.

Contracting conversation Teachers were involved in drawing up the framework for the mentoring-coaching process. A contract is defined which establishes what the practitioner and mentor-coach(es) will do. The basis of this contract agrees that:

- The practitioner and mentor-coach will engage in honest communication
- The practitioner and mentor-coach will use active listening
- The mentor-coach will use questioning to challenge the practitioner to identify evidence-based reflections.

The teacher and mentor-coach may add to this contract.

Pre-lesson dialogue (30 minutes) The teacher talks through aims and intentions. Mentoring starts then, getting the teacher to reflect on planning, with space to think and develop their vision. The mentor-coach's questioning supports this. Development points from an earlier observation can be included in the discussion, and also the relevant OFSTED criteria and teachers standards as appropriate. The discussion helps the teacher identify a focus point for the observation, if desired.

Observation (1 hour) The two mentor-coaches position themselves separately so as to provide different perspectives and to cover the whole class (inside/outside, for example). They keep a running record with timings. They try not to affect the course of the lesson, but may interact with children at times.

They may target particular learners, or focus on some aspect of improvement in practice such as differentiation, communication – the teacher has decided the focus in the pre-lesson dialogue.

Post-lesson dialogue (45 minutes) This is done on the same day or else next day. The teacher decides the time, so the mentor-coaches need to work round that. It's not immediately after the lesson, as all need time to reflect.

There is no written input to the discussion, so the dialogue is equal from the teacher and

mentor-coaches. The three sit together, in an active listening mode, and the lead mentor asks questions. The skill is in asking the right questions: one has judgements of one's own but the questioning is to prompt the teacher to reflect on what worked well and what might need more development. ('How did that group respond?') gradually an agreement of what the lesson was like is built up.

Then we go on to strengths and development opportunities – evidence-based questioning to support the teacher's thinking. eg what priorities would be if the lesson were repeated. The earlier pre-lesson dialogue agreements supports reflection.

It is important for we mentor-coaches not to lead with what is in our heads; never tell them, create the opportunity for them to tell you what they are thinking that will take them further. Having two mentor-coaches makes more space for the teacher to reflect.

In the post-lesson dialogue the teacher writes, not the mentor-coaches. It's their documentation.

If it is a formal observation, grades are agreed right at the end of the process. (With trainees teachers, no grades as their teaching is assessed over time.) A separate part of the dialogue enables interaction with the criteria for formal observation (eg OFSTED). They can reflect on how their teaching relates to the criteria. In this way our school goes beyond merely fulfilling formal observation demands and becomes a true learning community.

What specific teaching resources did you use?

What CPD experiences, materials, research and expertise have you drawn on?

- Our Mentoring-Coaching publication was developed here. The Principal, Kay Bedford, worked with co-authors at the [London Centre for Leadership in Learning](#).
- Formal training with Roger Pask.
- CPD on how to unpick teaching and learning, OFSTED, how to interact with Teaching Standards, mentoring and coaching skills
- Development of core skills through post-post-lesson dialogue for the two mentor-coaches to reflect on their mentoring-coaching process.
- Live mentoring-coaching sessions with audience. I have done one with Kay Bedford (headteacher). You forget the audience is there. This is powerful training.
- After their first year, teachers are given the choice to share how they felt about the process at the start and end of the year.

Outcomes and Impact

What has been the impact on pupil learning?

Improved teaching has led to improved learning.

Evidence of impact on pupil learning

Learning walks.

What has been the impact on teaching?

Learning walks demonstrate that it has had a great impact on teaching. It is a dynamic development: the focuses of observation change and develop as the teacher develops their own practice.

Evidence of impact on teaching

All four of our IoE trainees achieved outstanding, very much due to the quality of mentoring. The last five Ofsted inspections have reported Outstanding, the latest being in [January 2014](#). Ofsted inspectors judged pupils' achievement, quality of teaching, children's behaviour and safety and leadership and management to all be outstanding but more specifically that "the school is a happy and well-maintained community."

What has been the impact on school organisation and leadership?

Teachers have the voice to lead what developments are in their classroom.

Evidence of impact on school organisation and leadership

What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

Commitment from the Principal. Total commitment to this process is needed so everything relates to it. You can't have two opposing methods going on at once.

What would your next steps be?

Dual observations are very time-heavy for the extended leadership team, so after the 3 year plan (2012-15) we aim to lessen the load by moving to 1-1 mentoring-coaching, and develop peer-coaching.

Sharing Practice

If another individual or school was attempting to replicate this work, where should they start?

- Come and watch it in practice at Swiss Cottage
- Get the commitment of the leadership team

What would be the essential elements to include?

- CPD on mentoring-coaching
- Develop a conceptual framework with whole school staff.