
Peer Coaching for Improvement of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This report reflects on the experience of conducting peer coaching for improvement of teaching practices and student learning. Peer coaching was first conducted by the Science Department offering Cambridge A-Level Programme on two Semester One classes. The observed lesson was targeted on engaging students through collaborative learning. Another experience on peer coaching was conducted by a group of teachers from different subjects and programmes, and targeted on learning by using formative assessment. The model attempted was the collegial peer coaching, and it included three main processes: pre-observation planning and discussion, two consecutive peer observations, and post-observation discussion. Peer coaching was found to be an impactful tool for professional development, because it offers teachers the opportunity for self-reflection, sharing of classroom experience, and mutual growth in teaching.

Keywords: Peer Coaching, observation, self-reflection, professional development, mentoring

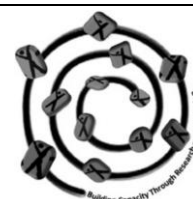
INTRODUCTION

Teachers nowadays face challenges, such as to improve student-centered teaching, to integrate technology into teaching and learning, and to implement higher-order thinking skills just to name a few. Traditionally, the improvement of teaching practices has been left to individual teachers to work out on their own. Lack of support, feedback or follow up has led to slow and insignificant progress. Peer coaching, which is also called instructional coaching, peer mentoring or lesson study, is a model of professional development that can be used to improve student learning by improving teaching. Peer coaching requires that the teachers who are involved to reflect on practice, share successful practices and suggestions, and/or learn from and with colleagues. It helps to engage not only the beginner teachers, but also the seniors, in learning collaboratively and professionally, to address common and mutual challenges in teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is peer coaching? Peer coaching was first proposed as an on-site dimension of staff development in US, in the early 1980s (Joyce & Showers, 1980). Peer coaching can be defined as an interactive process between two or more teaching professionals who work together to reflect on current practices. It can be used for expanding, refining, and building

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new skills, and thus ideas and feedback can be shared among the group members after conducting classroom observations.

Peer coaching can also be helpful to reduce isolation among teachers and to build collaborative norms to enable teachers to support each other. Hence, peer coaching helps to develop a better understanding of best practices and better-articulated curriculum. According to Becker (n.d.), peer coaching has contributed to an overall improvement in teaching and learning in the US schools.

Why peer coaching but not a training/workshop? Peer coaching has been recommended as a more effective approach for professional development for its deep impact on the teacher's performance in the classroom. In the United State, education researchers Beverly Shower and Bruce Joyce have looked at the effectiveness of professional development approaches over the past 25 years. According to their studies, the short and afterschool workshops or seminars which were conducted often in the past, have been proved totally ineffective in changing teacher classroom behaviours (Joyce & Calhoun, 1996). Peer coaching is a transfer of training to classroom practice. For teachers to improve their practice, they learn best from other teachers provided that these teachers are also working on improvement. These exchanges are thus purposeful, and based on evidence (Fullan, 2011).

Peer coaching is not just mentoring. It is an approach to professional learning involving ongoing systematic support (Ray, 2013). In peer coaching, the focus is on the teacher as a learner. It involves mastering the technical practices, self-reflection, action research, and collaborative learning (Robbins, 1991). Whereas for mentoring, it is a temporary collaborative relationship between two teachers, a master teacher and a novice or new teacher. Mentoring means more towards providing new teachers with a support system, a passive shadow learning process compared to peer coaching.

Peer coaching is also not part of the process of evaluating teachers. Excerpted from Peer Coaching, National Staff Development Council (1991), peer coaching is a trial and error approach for teacher's success. It is a forward-looking, improvement-oriented and formative process. However, evaluation is summative, in which a supervisor or administrator reviews on progress and achievement. Feedback on peer coaching teachers must not be evaluative.

Peer coaching can be found in a variety of models. According to "How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program" by Robbins (1991) and "Mentoring and Coaching Models" by Classroom Connect, Inc.:

1. Collegial peer coaching involves two or more teachers working together around the shared observation of teaching. There is generally a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference. The observed teacher is in control of the lesson, and the emphasis is a reflection on the observed lesson.
2. Challenge coaching involves a group of teachers working together to solve a specific instructional challenge or problem. A coach, who is usually a specialist or an experienced teacher, steers the coaching process by identifying the focus of the observation, form of data collection, guidelines and discussion of the observed teaching.
3. Technical coaching is designed to help teachers transfer what has been learnt in a workshop into a classroom. Teachers observe and help each other to recognise how to use the newly learned strategies as an effective teaching and learning tools.
4. Team coaching involves a teacher who is highly skilled in a specific area to work with

another teacher. Both teachers plan and implement/teach together in the class (team teaching). Students are not aware that one of the teachers is more knowledgeable who is there to support the other teacher to learn, master and refine a new teaching skill. After the lesson, both teachers evaluate the success of the lesson together.

Effective peer coaching is built upon communication that is honest and open, with participants contributing an unbiased attitude, and willingness to help each other to grow professionally. It is dedicated to working in a trusting relationship with an attitude to seek for improvement in teaching skills, a better learning experience for students and also sharing of classroom experiences. Robert Garmston, an educator, researcher and co-developer of the Cognitive Coaching SM model (a type of peer coaching), said in “Peer coaching: An Effective Staff Development Model For Educators”, “peer coaching can further a teacher’s individual professional development, for improving school climate.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In my college, the Science Department of Cambridge A-level Program has been assigned to a pilot project of peer coaching to evaluate its effectiveness (Liew, 2015). Four teachers, including myself, discussed as a team the concept and principles of peer coaching initially, under the guidance of the Programme Coordinator and the Principal.

The team selected a focus for the coaching, which was to engage students effectively in collaborative learning. The lesson was aimed to examine students’ participation in collaborative activities, to ensure each of the students pulls their weight in the group learning. The targeted group of students were from two Semester One classes, with 15 students in each respective class.

The model that was attempted by the team was the collegial peer coaching. The practice included three processes, pre-observation discussion, peer observation in class, and post-observation discussion, as shown in figure 1 (modified from NCSALL Mentor Teacher Group Guide).

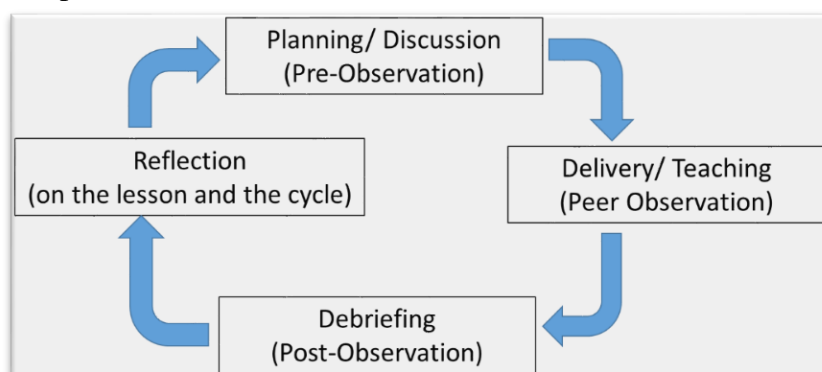


Figure 1. (Peer coaching cycle)

In the pre-observation discussion, the lesson plan was designed together by the team. It was a lesson on cell division, incorporating a jigsaw activity (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) and a role play performance by students. It was a 55-minute lesson, and each section of the lesson was briefly assigned for a period of time. Next, the team discussed the focus areas and sample questions for the observation. Each teacher was to observe on one focus area and take note of it during the observation. These were the focused aspects and sample questions used for the observation:

1. Learner engagement - How were the students participating in the group work?

2. Teacher talk - Was teacher's instruction clear for group work?
3. Classroom management - How was the managing of time?
4. Learner talk - Did students ask questions? What were the questions? How did the teacher respond?

During the observation, I conducted the class as planned, and was trying to keep the classroom atmosphere as usual as possible. The three other teachers (observers) were seated at different corners in the classroom. The same lesson plan was then conducted to the other targeted class by Mr. Kumar (a pseudonym), and observation was carried out by the other two teachers and me. The replication of the lesson using the same lesson plan allowed me as the teacher being observed to see the differences in conducting the lesson and prompted me further in self-reflection. After the observation, observers' reports which covered all the focus areas were shared. During the post-observation meeting, the team shared not only the suggestions for the lesson but also the feedback for peer coaching.

Peer coaching has been scheduled as part of the professional development plan for all teachers in the institution after this pilot project. My second experience in peer coaching was a team that made up with Ms. Helena (a pseudonym), who taught literature for another pre-U programme and Ms. Kamala (a pseudonym), who taught science for an international diploma programme. The lesson was aimed to examine how formative assessment could be used effectively in a lesson. The targeted group of students were from my junior class with 18 students. The same model of coaching and practice was implemented.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Reflection on benefits for peer coaching

The primary goal of the peer coaching project was to improve our teaching and learning experience by self-reflection and peer assistance. From the class observation in the peer coaching pilot project, I managed to reflect on my teaching, and realised my problems by observing the same lesson conducted by another teacher. At the same time, my weaknesses were pointed out by the observers. They were my extra eyes and ears, blind in the class. This was especially needed because my lesson was about collaborative learning, where students might move around and make noise. I learnt from the observers my mistakes and weaknesses that I was blind to or unaware of, suggestions for improvement and also the observers' experience of handling the lesson.

Besides, the benefits of observation are twofold. Not only the teacher observed gained specific and constructive feedback from the observers, the observers were exposed to different teaching styles and classroom management. For example, I learned from Mr. Kumar's lesson the importance of making a clear instruction for a group activity; whereas two observers responded they had to opportunity to witness different groups of learners from classes they observed.

In addition, peer coaching has improved the working habits in our department. The discussion for pre- and post-observation, the lesson plan, the feedbacks and comments for improvement had enhanced better communication and commitment in the team. It could not be denied that for effective peer coaching, team members must be dedicated to working in a trusting relationship and to be open-minded with sharing classroom experiences. Peer coaching not only helped us to grow professionally but also to build trust.

The previous coaching model in this institution was coaching in pairs. Every teacher had a coach, and only Senior Lecturers and Coordinators were coaches. Coaches observed the

coachee's class formally or informally, followed by a post-observation meeting. The coach would comment on the coachee's teaching skills and classroom management, in order to help the junior or beginner teachers for improvement. However, both the coach and coachee might not necessarily be teaching the same subject. Compared to the peer coaching piloted in this project, it was found the piloted model of coaching was more relevant and impactful. The observers were grouped according to the subjects they taught and hence they were able to provide better support to one another due to the similar context they shared. These contexts might range from facing similar challenges in classroom management to difficulties on certain topics in the content. Peer coaching also led to mutual understanding among the teachers, rather than a feeling of being mentored or evaluated by the seniors and supervisor.

An indirect benefit from the peer observation was setting ourselves up as role models for the students. Before the observation, the students were informed that the lessons would be observed by many teachers for the purpose of action research in teaching and learning. This was to clarify the situation to the students so that they would not feel stressed by the presence of other teachers in the classroom.

It was also done with the hope that they would continue to feel secured towards learning in the classroom. During the period of peer observation, I observed that the students were excited to be participating in this action research. Many indicated that they were also open-minded learners and welcomed the idea of seeking for improvement together with their teacher. They also commented that seeing their teachers put in the effort to improve themselves through collaboration with their colleagues was a good example for them.

In the second cycle of peer coaching, the team consisted of teachers who were teaching different subjects in different programmes. As the teachers were clear about the common aim to improve skills in formative assessment, I gained from the sharing how to create different types of formative assessments and how to accurately assess students on the learning outcomes. In addition, the team also reminded one another on areas to improve on as well as shared possible action plans in conducting various formative assessments. The learning experiences expanded across programmes.

Challenges for peer coaching

The main challenge was the scheduling of class observation. As teachers had to cater to students from different intakes and programmes, it was not an easy task to find a common time to conduct peer observation. Some of the available options were to observe during examination period when teachers had fewer hours to teach. Alternatively, teachers had to swap classes to accommodate for the observers' availability.

Another challenge was the tendency of teachers over-preparing the lessons that were going to be observed. More time was spent on planning the lesson and activities and attempting to pass the observation or impress the observers. To this extent, peer observation could be a burden and a source of stress if not handled appropriately.

Finally, having one or two observations in class might not be impactful to improve teachers' daily practices. Peer observation, in order to be effective and meaningful, had to be scheduled or practised continuously so that it could work as a team support and collaborative learning. For example, in observing how collaborative learning could engage students in learning would require time as students needed it to learn about group skills and social skills. There would be a lack of follow up for the teacher observed if peer observation was only conducted

once or twice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

According to Trent Ray's report on peer coaching (2013), teachers' needs should not be overlooked in the emphasis on meeting the needs of students for a 21st Century education. Effective professional learning should be made available to teachers as good teachers are life-long learners, who constantly reflect on their teaching and reinvent teaching methods, in keeping up with educational trends and the needs of student.

Peer coaching could be one of the powerful tools for professional development. It allows teachers to improve their teaching practices by learning from peers and adopting self-reflection. Moreover, when teachers with similar goals pair or triple up and function as peer coaches to one another, collaborative learning happens. Teachers no longer feel isolated while experiencing challenges in their classrooms, especially in implementing new strategies or technologies in teaching.

In order to facilitate peer observation, flexible timetabling of classes should be considered. Allowing the swapping of classes among teachers could encourage teachers to schedule for class observation. Besides, logistical consideration and support from the organisation are crucial to ensure peer coaching program is designed with built-in flexibility. For example, substitute or student teacher can take over the class to release teachers for coaching. Administrators might help to facilitate the coaching program by assisting in scheduling the observation or organising activities during peer observation period.

A well-structured plan is needed for bringing teachers into peer coaching. Teachers need to be motivated, mentally prepared and trained with coaching skills. Teachers in a team should communicate well in lesson planning and support each other with positive ideas. Comparison and criticism that are not constructive in peer learning should be avoided. Peer coaching means more to observe, to reflect, and to provide feedback.

In addition, the practice of sharing among teachers is more important than keeping records and writing reports. Miscellaneous work that do not directly support teaching and learning should be kept to the minimum as it might hold back teachers who would like to try for peer coaching. Assessment on results of coaching should be considered moderately. Peer coaching, after all, is for the purpose of encouraging teachers to share experience and strategy in teaching and learning.

The scope and purpose of peer coaching can be diverse. It could help teachers in the group or pair to improve in different areas or skills such as cooperative learning, blended learning, critical thinking, teacher questioning techniques, and differentiated instruction. It might also work for teachers who are planning to integrate technology into their classroom and learning process. For example, teaching with a smartboard or flipped classroom.

In conclusion, peer coaching is an interactive process between two or more teachers who work together to reflect on current practices. It helps to develop and try new strategies in teaching, determining what does and does not work by self-reflection and feedback from observers. Peer coaching is built upon a trusting relationship among teachers, who are mutually working together to improve teaching skills in order to improve student learning.

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