Professional development for teachers: a collaborative coaching model

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Abstract
This article accounts for an approach to coaching developed by a teacher who is a ‘lead practitioner’ in a secondary school as well as being a member of the HertsCam Tutor Team. The article outlines the 6 stages and key features of the model that emerged. These include the collaborative nature of the process based on an informal, conversational style of knowledge exchange. Although Tom Murphy led the project in school, the paper co-authored with his father who acted as an adviser.

The continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers remains an enduring priority as with any other professional group. However, challenges for the teaching profession as a result of a range of issues, and perhaps especially wide-ranging changes to the exam system, the national curriculum and teachers’ pay (Harrison, 2013), does lead to a situation where many teachers believe that their own development is a low priority. In contrast, it can also be argued that these very issues lead to a need for professional development that has rarely been greater for teachers.

This paper describes a model for professional development designed to take account of, and complement, the already demanding role of teacher. The focus of this programme was a model designed to develop teachers’ skills as they relate to their students, to their colleagues and to their own professional development in general, through a framework of mutual support and coaching. The six stages of the programme are described and the rationale and issues for each stage are elucidated. It is proposed that such a model can bring major benefits to the teaching staff, the quality of their professional practice, and ultimately the learning capacity of the organisation.

The two proposers of the model have jointly authored this paper. However it is written in the first person narrative as the intervention took place in the school within which T. Murphy (a lead practitioner with whole-school teaching and learning responsibilities) has worked since 2005.

Developing mutual support

The encouragement of teacher collaboration in professional development is necessary for effective professional learning to occur (Harris, 2000), and is linked with improvements in both teaching and learning (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell and Evans, 2005). In addition, Hargreaves (1998) argues that traditional dissemination of good practice in schools often fails because it runs against the grain of how teachers do their work; they do not simply accept uncritically drastic changes to their work when they are suggested from sources other than their fellow
teachers. ‘Peer-coaching’ has been a feature of teacher CPD in the United States for many years, and was defined by Robbins (cited in Rhodes and Beneicke, 2002) as:

a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect upon current practices; expand, refine and build new skills; share ideas…or problem solve’ (cited in Rhodes and Beneicke, 2002: 298).

However, creating the conditions for such mutual support can present a challenge for many schools, where effective collaboration is not prevalent. Rhodes and Beneicke (2002) write of the challenges for school leadership teams in embracing mechanisms that develop trust between colleagues; for example the careful selection of individuals as coaches, engaging commitment and the use of an accurate needs-analysis as a pre-requisite for deploying support. Furthermore, in order to effectively utilise human resources, the goals set must be realistic in terms of the school’s capacity and the external context (Davidoff and Lazarus, 1997).

The initiative

Our story takes place in a moderately sized comprehensive school in Hertfordshire, with around 120 members of staff. In addition to the normal challenges of such a school, it also has responsibilities for support, research and development and teacher training across a collective of around twenty schools, as a recently designated ‘Teaching School’. Within the school, the continuing professional development of teachers and the development of the school as a ‘learning organisation’ (Senge, 1990) are considered key priorities.

Our first challenge as a leadership team was to allocate the appropriate time to ensure that a development plan could be appropriately implemented. We believed that a poorly delivered programme would in itself be destructive to morale, as well as sacrificing very valuable time. A key aim was to assign some of the contracted hours for which teachers were employed within the school year. As such it was decided to reduce the school calendar by one day in order to release up to 5 hours of time for each member of staff to use within the programme. The strategy was notionally called ‘The Learning Group Strategy’, and was launched with both teachers and some support staff in September 2012. Initially, time was dedicated during a scheduled training session to a workshop entitled ‘Effective Coaching’. This training came as a response to Gardner and Korth’s assertion that:

while businesses are looking for employees who can work effectively in teams…schools are being criticised for not preparing employees with the necessary team-related skills (2010:28-33).

We explored approaches to coaching and the essential features of a successful coach/client relationship, with emphasis on unlocking potential. As such, our participants were given the
opportunity to explore effective questions that a coach would utilise to empower the client in the manner described in research from the Centre by Creative Leadership (Frankovelgia, 2010). It was proposed to the participants that these kinds of informal and supportive relationships, based sometimes on nothing more than a brief conversation in a corridor, would be essential to the success of this programme. There would be six key phases as set out below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Learning Groups Programme overview**

Phase 1:
Meet your group, nominate a group facilitator, write a personal development plan

Phase 2:
Personal development period – research

Phase 3:
Feedback on personal development to group and plan a personal development activity

Phase 4:
Carry out personal development activity

Phase 5:
Feedback to group and share learning

Phase 6:
Whole school sharing and celebration of development

**Phase 1: Creating the learning groups**

One of the most critical elements of this first stage of the process was to identify the small group structures, which would serve as the vehicle for the development experience. An initiative at the University of Portland (Rigelman, 2010) placed trainee teachers in ‘triads’ with colleagues and more experienced staff to develop collaboration and contribute ideas to support learning during the training process; in this model it was crucial that the groups would cooperate and as such the experienced colleague played a crucial facilitative role.

We asked participants, in advance, to select a ‘personal learning goal’, and a reserve choice, for the coming year, specifically tied to the development of teaching and learning. These were then categorised into more general classifications so that each individual could be grouped with colleagues with similar development needs. It took significant effort to agree these small groups (3-5 people), as it was believed that the right mix of needs, skills and leadership capacity was critical to achieving meaningful outcomes. One consequence of this process was the heightening of our understanding of our colleagues’ personal development needs and, in turn, how best to support them.
At the ‘launch’ meeting of the strategy with participants, we outlined the process of personal contracting and mutual coaching so that there was clarity in the goals of the experience. Each group nominated a ‘group facilitator’ who would simply take responsibility for arranging the meeting times and venues for their group; but would have no accountability for outcomes. The participants were also asked to complete a ‘personal development plan’ using a pre-prepared tool, in order to clarify their aims for the process and identify any potential barriers to success.

**Phase 2: Research, reading and observation**

Following the initial launch of the programme and the coaching discussion, we introduced the second step. This required the small groups, having identified their own personal learning priorities, typically one or two pieces of behaviour which the individual could identify and which the rest of the group supported, to carry out some degree of inquiry. General reading on the nature and value of coaching was supplied to each group and was also the focus of informal discussions through the second phase. In addition, we asked group members to observe each other carrying out a particular activity. These activities, together with any associated new learning, would then be shared with the other group members formally at the first review meeting, organised by the group facilitator at an appropriate point (Phase 3). For the leadership team it was important that these group meetings were not organised centrally; for effective self-development and coaching to occur we believed that it was essential that the groups remained self-directing during this period. Group facilitators were asked, however, to enter the dates of their meetings on a central record and in this way it was possible to track which groups were making progress with their development plans, and which needed encouragement to do so.

**Phase 3: Group feedback**

During this stage of the learning process, our participants were asked to arrange their own meetings in order to share their initial progress with their group. If the group members wanted to allocate additional personal time to the activities, and indeed to develop more detailed plans, then this was their decision. Conversely, if the group members wanted only to review their plans and progress at the formal group meetings, then this again was their choice. In this way, each individual and each group was able to identify the best learning process for themselves, hopefully leading to greater motivation from the teachers, many of whom were carrying heavy workloads and significant personal commitments. A process that provides both structure and flexibility is best suited to the needs of a busy teaching staff and large school; any intervention that does not recognise the existing pressures and tensions in the contemporary school environment is less likely to be effective and may even be counterproductive to the goal of creating a ‘learning’ organisation. This is supported by Mitchell and Sackney, who claim that
creating a learning community is about building the capacity of people in schools to relate to each other in communitarian, rather than bureaucratic or individualistic, ways (2001).

**Phase 4: ‘Do one thing’**

One early principle that was reinforced from the beginning of discussions with participants was that each participant would be expected to do at least ‘one thing’; this would be an activity or process, which responded to the personal learning goal set at the start. For many colleagues this would be a relatively simple, small-scale innovation; for example to trial a new assessment process with a specific class of students. Although on a smaller scale, this concept was greatly inspired by the successful teacher-led development work model used successfully within the HertsCam Network (www.hertscam.org.uk). This one goal would be a piece of behaviour which could be clearly seen and supported as a development need, relating directly to impact in the classroom. It was difficult for any member of staff to argue that there was either no area where they needed to develop, or that there was insufficient time on which to work on this issue. Equally, the ‘one thing’ focus provided for a very efficient group discussion, as well as great clarity both for the individual who was to work on the behaviour and in the support to be obtained from the other group members along the way. Furthermore, as part of broader staff performance management, it contributed to creating a climate where development, as well as assessment, was the subject of appraisals.

**Phase 5: Reflecting, sharing and learning**

In Phase 5, the groups met for a final time to discuss and share their learning. We hoped that the coaching element, and group accountability of the process would have contributed emphatically to any individual success. The sense that the whole community was engaged in this journey was also recognised as a source of momentum. As each participant had the same requirement – to ‘do one thing’ - then it was believed that there would be a sense that we were ‘all in this together’. Moving a whole organisation forward is always a challenge especially where, as in the case of teaching staff, there are generally fragmented and very individual performance goals and objectives. Again, the overall energy and commitment to the programme would be enhanced by the process adopted both at the individual and group level. A useful, albeit coincidental, input into this was at a school training event during the year at which the speaker quoted the Great Britain Olympic Cycling Coach, Sir Dave Brailsford, as saying that it was the ‘aggregation of marginal gains’ that led to the team’s success at London 2012. There were clearly parallels with the ‘do one thing’ concept employed here; if every colleague was able to make a small improvement to their personal practice, then this would likely result in larger-scale impact to the success of the school.
Phase 6: Networking at a celebration event

At the end of the year, a ‘networking event’ was held at which the best practice developed during the process, as well as the lessons learned, were shared. This event was again based on a networking model utilised by the HertsCam Network, within which participants in the programme regularly attend ‘network events’ at which they discuss the progress of their development work and share good practice; the aim being that the network ‘de-privatises’ the classroom as well as providing a form of ‘social validation’ for the sharing of effective practice (Hargreaves, 1998: 33-49). At our event, each ‘learning group’ was asked to reflect on their individual and group learning during the period and use a table-top display to show evidence of development in any form, including examples of student work. This process of capturing the learning, recognising creative ideas and acknowledging progress served many purposes. While there were clear advantages at the individual level in terms of sharing best practice, it was hoped that, at the school level, it might contribute to the creation of wider networks within our staff and broaden the sphere of learning from the small groups that were initially established. Ultimately this initiative is one that can advance the competency of the individual teacher and, perhaps more significantly, propel the school forward as a ‘learning organisation’.

Photographs 1,2: Photos from the celebratory ‘network event’, showing colleagues from a range of school departments sharing their development work

Evaluation

Following the ‘networking event’ we asked participants, through an online survey, to help us evaluate the impact of this process. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with short statements, and also provide more open-ended feedback on impact and potential improvements to the programme. The outcomes were overwhelmingly positive, with over three quarters of participants agreeing that the programme had impacted on their practice; they had benefited from it, and they were looking forward to repeating the process again.
Open-ended feedback also indicated that the programme had a positive impact on personal development. Comments included the following.

*It has stimulated conversations that have sparked ideas.*  
(Teacher A)

*It has forced me to be more resourceful regarding promoting literacy.*  
(Teacher B)

*The development...might have got lost in competing priorities, without the nudge.*  
(Teacher C)

*The quality of my marking has improved....I now enable students to reflect on their work in a more meaningful way.*  
(Teacher D)

Comments regarding improvements to the programme mainly centred on support for the group facilitators; as some had struggled to successfully coordinate group meetings without our intervention. A couple of participants felt that group interests were perhaps too diverse and that this had presented a barrier to collaboration. A couple of insightful comments reflected that certain elements of the ‘coaching’ process had been lost in the drive to come up with a good idea. This feedback provides a form of validation for Hargreaves’ (1998) assertion that CPD processes need to be explicitly managed, so that ‘professional tinkering’ (1998:41) is turned into more effective knowledge creation.

**Conclusion**

School leaders face a constant challenge in any educational context to provide opportunities for the professional growth of teachers, and, as Brandt (2003) suggests, create a school culture that invites deep and sustained professional learning that will have a powerful impact on student achievement. The pressure of curriculum change, the need for higher levels of measured attainment and extra-curricular responsibility does mean that there is little time available for teachers to engage in self-development. However this does not absolve members of staff from the responsibility of ensuring that they maintain their own personal and professional progression.

More effective use of contracted hours provides a vehicle for enabling professional development, although as Brandt (2003) proposes, the programme content must still be meaningful and include opportunities for social interactions. The use of a structured framework involving mutual support and coaching, an emphasis on ‘do one thing’ and a mechanism for accountability together with a process for sharing best practice as described above, appears to meet the needs of professional growth within the context of a very busy school environment. In
addition, networks of personal and professional development were created across the school community and contributed to both school morale and capacity. At this school, it is evident that following a year-long trial of this programme, foundations have been laid that will facilitate the continued development of a learning and collaborative ethos within the school community.

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References


