A Voice That Is Heard
Living the Writing Project Philosophy as Coaches

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Thanks for Friday. It was great to have you help me scout things around. Listening and following my ramble also deserves big brownie points. It's wonderful to be able to talk to you because you can flip from my class to theory to my aspirations.

—Email message from a coachee

Creating a Coaching Philosophy

In the spring of 1999, in preparation for a large-scale coaching project sponsored jointly by the UCLA Writing Project and the Venice/Westchester Cluster of the Los Angeles Unified School District, I attended a coaching symposium in Oxnard, California. I worked with other educators, reading and discussing research on teacher learning and coaching. In her presentation, Beverly Showers, a consultant in staff development and teacher learning, shared the disappointing effects of most professional development workshops. She made it clear that for all the planning of participatory activities put into a presentation, the best one might expect is that 15 percent of the audience would transfer the information into classroom practice. In contrast, a coaching model where a coach and a teacher work as equals produces a marked change in teacher practice.

For years, I had been wondering whether the strategies I offered in after-school presentations were ever tried, but pleasant comments and positive evaluations made it easy to ignore the question. Recently, as thousands of emergency-credentialed teachers hired for class-size reduction began showing up in my audiences, it became obvious that workshops—after school, all day, even weekend—were largely ineffective. After each workshop, I was mobbed by new teachers wanting to know just how to teach reading: whether or not students should copy an essay off the board; if second grade teachers should teach reading since that was done in first grade; or how to get students to sit down, begin writing, line up, like books. These were teachers who had no student teaching experience and no education course work, and yet they were full-time teachers, sometimes in their third year of teaching. They needed much more than another workshop.

The coaching model adopted for the UCLA-Venice/Westchester Collaborative Coaching Project was based on experiences with these teachers and the belief in collaborative learning. As Beverly Showers put it, "Coaching develops the shared language and set of common understandings necessary for the collegial study of new knowledge and skills." The coaching project mission statement put it this way:

The mission of the UCLA-Venice/Westchester Collaborative Coaching Project is to better student literacy outcomes through strengthening teacher practice. Teacher practice is strengthened through regular interaction between teacher and coach. Coaching is a partnership between two professionals working to solve the everyday and the complex
problems of teaching. Coaching involves everything from working with a teacher to create a literature-rich environment for diagnosing and developing reading lessons for individual students. The key to the project is the belief that coaches are no more and no less than a partner in this process and always behave as such.

The work of other authors also helped shape how coaches in the project operated. Nolan and Hillkirk stress that “the coach’s role was to facilitate, to listen, and to engage the teacher in an ongoing dialogue about the meaning and implications of his intentions and actions in the classroom.” To realize this role meant being in the classroom with the teacher, acting as co-teachers or partner teachers.

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The coaching project unfolded. The partnerships and conversations began as I met a few of my soon-to-be coachees, including Laura, at a new-teacher workshop that we coaches presented for the district. Laura is a district intern, which means she has a bachelor’s degree, has passed the state exam to prove minimum competency for teaching, works under an emergency credential, and receives training after school and on Saturdays throughout the school year. Laura, who took me up on an offer to help her set up her classroom, is typical of the teachers we loved working with as coaches: she is bright, enthusiastic, and as interested as we are in ideas.

Teachers like Laura gave us solace when the chaos of coaching in a large urban district made helping teachers difficult.

Laura and I agreed to meet at her classroom the Saturday before school started. She had decorated the room with butcher paper trains ready to display her soon-to-be-second-graders’ work. Fifteen boxes of children’s books sat on the desktops. Her instinct to provide books and a library were good, but it would be difficult for her to act upon and sustain those instincts in the school in which she had been hired. My primary task with Laura would be to help her achieve success with her natural inclination toward a constructivist philosophy of teaching in a school that, with few exceptions, held to rigid transmission model practices.

Our first conversations took place around the physical arrangement of her room. After creating a class library with three bookshelves, a five-by-nine-foot carpet remnant bound around the edges with matching burnt orange electrical tape, and her books, sixty-three square feet of her space was gone. As we continued to arrange furniture to provide tables, cubbies made out of cardboard shoe organizers, and various learning centers, it became clear that there was no room for her teacher’s desk. It was the first collision with the school culture.

“Do you need a desk?” I asked.
“Can I just get rid of it though?”
“When would you use it?”
“Planning.”
“Okay, when would you be doing that?”
“After school, I guess.”
“So, for the rest of the day, it would just be sitting there.”

We discussed a couple of options—for example, replacing the construction/literature response center with the desk and letting students use the desktop during the day, covering part of the library rug, etc.—but decided to push the teacher desk into a corner so that Laura could think about it and decide later.

When I returned a week later, the desk was gone. She had quietly asked the custodian to remove the desk late one afternoon when most of the other teachers had gone home. Even though she liked the space, she was nervous about the decision. At her first intern meeting, she had received a list of regulations, one of which stated that the role book must be kept in the upper right-hand drawer of the teacher’s desk at all times.

I explained that it was unlikely that anyone would ever check on this regulation, and we discussed how she could comply with the spirit of the rule. But something was still bothering her. It seemed that lunchtime conversation that week had focused on control. The consensus, as Laura understood it, was that control over students was developed through authority, and control over learning was accomplished with strict adherence to the basal. She felt herself drifting out of compliance with the role of teacher as her school defined it.

“Doesn’t the desk say something about who is in charge?” Laura asked.
“Sure.”
“It’s my classroom, right?”
“Is that how you think of it?”
Laura didn’t think so, but she continued with her argument calling for more teacher control. The students were leaving the library a mess, they were just painting every day at the construction/response-to-literature center, and they were writing about Pokémon™ every day in their journals.
The normal problems of teaching combined with a school culture that was different from the one she was creating had shaken her. As we talked, Laura saw that giving students more control would solve some of the classroom issues. She added library monitor to her classroom monitor list, she arranged the books in baskets so that students could better organize them, and she planned a time within her reading lessons for students to discuss what should be required at the construction/response to literature center. I confirmed that she was indeed doing things differently from most of the other teachers and that she was right to look critically at her own practice. I also asked her not to abandon something without first examining why she had adopted the practice in the first place, and without knowing whether or not the reasoning supported student learning.

Although unsure about the direction she was going, Laura agreed to move ahead with targeted small-group instruction with my help. We grouped her students by reading level as estimated from profiles the previous teacher provided. Together, we found several trade-fiction and non-fiction books for each group and built a universal theme for the first trimester around the titles we collected. We then planned for the next few weeks of reading. I was there the first two days Laura implemented this small-group rotation, helping students learn the traffic patterns, and helping Laura decide how to deal with the student work, pictures, beginnings of stories, and little books generated at the centers each day. As Laura continued with these plans over the next few weeks, she thought she saw progress in her students' ability to read and discuss the books they shared at small-group lessons.

However, she lost sight of the progress every time a teacher at her school offered to share a worksheet or favorite lesson plan out of the basal. Laura would take the worksheets and advice and save them up for my visits. The worksheets lured Laura at the same time they terrified her. They seemed like such a surefire way to cover the skills, yet Laura worried that her students would struggle to correct the comma errors on the items or match definitions with the lists of holiday words. Laura assumed that if her students could not do well on these tasks, it was evidence that she had not taught her students these skills. We had many conversations such as the following.

"I gave this to my sharpest student to take home for fun. Look!"

This happened to be a Presidents' Day vocabulary worksheet. The student had matched five of the fifteen items correctly.

"Is this something you think they need to be able to do?" I asked.

"They have to know vocabulary."

"Do you think this worksheet will help them?"

"Maybe if I did it with them."

"Okay, then what?"

She shrugged. "Test them?"

I asked Laura how she learned new words. She admitted it was through reading, but she still had an inkling that her students' vocabulary was not growing enough to keep up with their peers at the school. I told her she might well be right. I still asked, "How do you know?"

Laura gave me a blank stare. This was a critical question for her and me. She needed a way to confirm her hunches about student growth. She also needed a way to analyze any growth assessment so that it would drive her instructional decisions and insulate her from the pressure to replace with skill sheets the reading and writing she and her students were doing. Additionally, as a coach, I could learn about Laura's students with her. I could provide another perspective on their present learning. Normally, a colleague can at best share information about where the students were the previous year.

I showed Laura how to administer an informal reading inventory (IRI), and we planned to teach together on my next visit, trading off leading the reading lessons and administering the IRI. Assessing students individually while sustaining instruction is a complex task for experienced teachers, much less a first-year, emergency-credentials teacher. Not only are the logistics of individual assessment difficult, the implications of knowing directly what each student is able to do and ready to learn next are often overwhelming. Individual assessment results force a teacher to come to terms with the fact that students need different texts for reading instruction and that even students within reading levels may need coaching on very different aspects of reading and writing. Laura was not going to come out of this with a neat set of lesson plans for increasing vocabulary.

As the year rolled on, I sometimes wondered why a teacher like Laura considered operating in this way—even with the extra set of hands I provided. Had Laura attended one of my workshops on writing analytically in the primary grades, she may have learned how analytical writing follows analytical reading, seen some impressive student samples, and done some writing herself, but she would not have seen the structure, assessment practices, and
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instructional decision making it took to move my second-graders into analytical reading and writing. As a presenter, I would have held the same role her colleagues now held—that of an expert so removed from her day-to-day experience with her particular students that anything I offered would seem like handing her the decorator’s plans when her house wasn’t even built yet.

But, as a coach, I was in a position to build the house with Laura. I was in her classroom. We planned, cleaned, arranged, assessed, and taught together. We were building her program together, and this gave my advice the authority only a partnership does. So, when I suggested Laura look to the books she was reading with each group to identify promising vocabulary study words, this made sense to her. When I demonstrated a student vocabulary webbing strategy, Laura saw how that could fit into the structure of her lessons and modified the strategy so that students could use it when writing in their daily journals.

Working together every week over her first year, Laura and I through our coaching relationship had become a writing project of two. Laura’s skill and confidence grew, and she switched from asking what she should do to asking what I thought about what she was going to do. In the spring, she developed a unit on relationships, adeptly collecting stories from the basal anthology that depicted different types of relationships. She added a letter-writing component that two of her second grade colleagues used. Laura had developed her own identity as a teacher and could share it with others.

Laura’s analysis of her own practice grew as well. She began “seeing” the strategies we had worked on as she implemented them. She adjusted ReQuest (a reading comprehension strategy) to more actively engage students. She observed how a mini-lesson on descriptive language was showing up in her students’ journal writing. As it came time for final grades and the prospect of retention for one of her students, Laura began to deeply study her own beliefs about education.

Coaching put two teachers in a room with a group of students on a regular basis. It provided Laura and I with a vehicle for working as teachers in this thoughtful way. In this intimate and immediate setting, Laura and I studied practice through student action and work. Most importantly, coaching allowed us to talk. Our conversations engendered deep reflection about the reason for teaching a lesson, the long-term goals of the instruction, and the nature of learning. Together, we negotiated the philosophical stance behind everything we did and ensured that the teaching was purposeful. We became the collegial partnership that Beverly Showers described, studying new knowledge and skills and ultimately becoming better teachers.

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