

Improving Instruction via Peer Coaching: A preliminary study

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Introduction:

Peer coaching is a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues/teachers work together and reflect on current teaching practices. It is a platform where teachers can expand, refine and build new skills by sharing ideas and classroom experience. It also allows teachers learn from one another, conduct classroom research or solve problems which are commonly encountered in the workplace (Pam Robbins, 1991).

According to Trent Ray's report on peer coaching (2013), while we are focusing on meeting the needs of students for a 21st Century education, we must not overlook the needs of teachers. Good teachers are those who see themselves as "life-long learners" to constantly reflect on their teaching and reinvent teaching methods as educational trends and the needs of student change. So, if we want our educators to have the skills to teach 21st Century learning skills, we need to offer them effective professional learning. Peer coaching suits both experienced teachers and beginner teachers. It provide a platform where teachers are less isolated while experiencing challenges in their classrooms, especially while implementing new strategies or technologies in teaching.

This report reflects on the experience of conducting a pilot project on peer coaching by the TCSH Biology Department of Cambridge A-level Program. The objective of this project is to evaluate the effectiveness of peer coaching as a professional development tool to improve teaching practices and student learning.

Peer coaching can be used for a variety of objectives. It can be a formal or informal sharing for different kinds of activities such as for co-teaching, action research, problem solving, study group, conversation about student work, lesson study, storytelling about teaching practices or any other activities related to teaching and learning.

According to "Using Peer Coaching to Improve Instruction" by Classroom Connect, Inc., there are a variety of models available for conducting a peer coaching. They are:

1. *Collegial peer coaching* - involves two or more teachers working together around the shared observation of teaching.
2. *Challenge coaching* - involves a group of teachers working together to solve a specific instructional challenge or problem.
3. *Technical coaching* - designed to help teachers transfer what is learned in a workshop into classroom.
4. *Team coaching* - involves a teacher who is highly skilled in a specific area to work with another teacher.

In TCSH, the coaching system that we previously practiced was a formal learning process, which was a pairing up of a junior/beginner teacher with a senior teacher or a subject coordinator or a supervisor. It was a coaching process which was more mentor oriented. This project was therefore the first trial where a group of subject teachers were working together as the coaches and being the observers in each other's classrooms. The group worked together for lesson planning, classroom observation, and also for feedback and discussion for improvement. Thus, it was absolutely a peer to peer effort to enhance teacher learning via reflection and sharing of classroom experiences.

Methodology:

Initially, under the guidance of Ms. Anne Moses (CAL Program Coordinator) and Ms. Lauren Wilson (TCSH Principal), the Biology department (Mr. Arvinraj Batumalai, Ms. Jade Yow, Ms. Saraswathy Ramachandran and I) discussed the concept and principles of our peer coaching project. 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 peer coaching cycle that we designed included three main stages, which were pre-observation discussion, peer observation in class, and post- observation discussion.

Pre-observation discussion:

1. A 55 minute - lesson plan was designed. It was a lesson on cell division, incorporating a jigsaw activity and a role play performance by students.
2. Focus areas and samples questions for the observation were determined. Sample questions used for the observation were:
 - a) How were the students participating in the group work?
 - b) Was teacher's instruction clear for group work?
 - c) How was the managing of time?
 - d) Did students ask questions? What were the questions? How did the teacher respond?

Peer observation in class:

1. I conducted the class as planned and the three other teachers (observers) were seated at a different corners in the classroom.
2. The same lesson plan was then conducted to the other targeted class by Mr. Arvinraj, and observation was carried out by the other two teachers and I.

Post-observation discussion:

1. Observers' reports which covered all the focus areas and questions were shared with the teacher being observed.
2. Observers also shared their suggestion to improve the lesson.
3. The team shared the feedback for peer coaching and its future prospect.

Outcomes:

What did I gain from this project? The replication of the lesson by using the same lesson plan allowed me as the observed teacher to see the significant differences in conducting the lesson and to make a self-reflection. During the observation, I found out the way I instructed the students for collaborative activities was rather complex and it could be done more effectively like what I observed in Mr. Arvinraj's class. This was not meant for comparison, but instead to reflect on my practice and to learn from others for enhancement. Besides, I learned when my weaknesses were pointed out by the observers.

Next, the benefits of observing went both ways. Not only the observed teachers got specific and constructive feedback from the observers, the observers were also exposed to different teaching styles and classroom management. Peer coaching also improved the working habits in our department. By going through the whole process in peer coaching, the team has more opportunity to communicate and share ideas. It offered the team the chance to work in a trusting relationship and to grow professionally in teaching.

Needless to say, one "hidden benefit" was to be a role model for my students. Before the observation, I informed the students that our lesson will be observed by many teachers for the purpose of an action research in teaching and learning. This is because I did not want the students to have the feeling of stress by having other teachers in our classroom. They are supposed to have the sense of belonging and feel secure to learn in their classroom. By informing the students that this observation was for research, surprisingly, they were excited about participating. This indicated that they were also open-minded learners, seeking for improvement together with their teacher. Thus, seeing their teachers put in effort and work with their peers was a wonderful example.

However, there were some challenges we encountered while conducting the peer coaching project, such as:

1. Scheduling for class observation

The observation was finally managed to be located during the examination period where some teachers have no classes but they had to swap the invigilation duty with other teachers.

2. Over-prepared lesson for observation

It could not be denied that I spent more time on planning the lesson and activities, attempting to "pass" the observation and to impress the observers. This could end up being a burden or a stress for observed teacher if it is not handled well.

3. A frequently scheduled and continuous practice on peer coaching and class observation

Having only one or two observations in class might not be impactful enough to improve our daily teaching practice. It must be a continuous effort so that it works as a "team support" and collaborative learning among the teacher. For example in this peer coaching project which observed on how collaborative learning could engage students in the lesson. According to Mark Osten (2002), it takes time to teach students the necessary group skills and social skills that are needed for cooperative learning. Therefore, by having only one or two observations, there would be lack of follow-up for the observed teacher.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, peer coaching helped me to reflect on my teaching practices in class so that corrective action could be taken to improve teaching and student learning. It also allowed me to learn skills from other teachers during the class observation and to gain feedback from the observers. It was an impactful way of professional growth and team building because of the mutual sharing of class experience and discussion among the teachers.

Reference

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