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Professional Learning Conversations

Instructional Coaching.

This is edited from a blog piece by Professor Rachel Lofthouse, originally published at <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2022/01/here-be-dragons---myth-busting-instructional-coaching-for-teachers/>

Instructional coaching has origins in the USA with probably the most significant proponent of it being Jim Knight (2007), who leads the Instructional Coaching Group. He has been working in this area for two decades.

Like other US imports into UK education there are those proponents who act as missionaries, seeding the new ideas into their own and other programmes. There is also a risk that instructional coaching becomes a buzzword leading to some superficial understandings and also potentially a fad – good for the current time, but likely be abandoned when not done well or another new craze comes along. Myths are created, people gain apparent guru status, and whole CPD programmes are rebranded to meet the new fashion.

So, let's dispel some myths by checking in with the language. Firstly, there is a long tradition of 'instruction' being used to mean 'teaching and learning' in the USA. In the UK we tend to think of instruction as a command, or a direct communication of information. As other US terminology, such as 'direct instruction' and 'explicit instruction' is also now commonly used in the UK we need to note that they add the terms 'direct' and 'explicit'. This demonstrates that the culturally sensitive meaning of the work instruction refers to pedagogy as a repertoire.

Secondly the instructional coaching model typically sits somewhere in between what we could tend to characterise as coaching and mentoring. Instructional coaches in the US are experienced teachers whose practice and training has allowed them to develop specific pedagogic expertise. As coaches they do not 'instruct' but instead they bring their expertise to bear within the coaching conversations.



It is also worth noting that instructional coaching done well has a strong social justice philosophy. It is about understanding how learning outcomes can be levered in ways that are not limited to improving test scores or judging teaching. It is significant that the greatest use of instructional coaching in the US has been in the teaching of reading, and this goes way beyond phonics or other single pedagogies to creating environments which invite reading and use reading as a key component of inclusion.

An important part of any coaching practice is the partnership which is created and hopefully sustained. In the case of the ECF this is between a teacher with some experience (mentor) and a novice (student or early career teacher) and is situated in the mentors' school context. There are two key aspects of this relationship that are significant. We need to reflect on the power dynamics that can be at play in the scenario (deliberate, implied and hidden) and we need to know something about how adults learn as novices in complex practice environments. There is an inherent hierarchy built into mentoring with the risk that this spills out into IC. But it is possible for both partners to gain a sense of parity which is a good basis for collegial working and the development of self-efficacy and emergent practice. Three characteristics of successful collaboration were highlighted in earlier research (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2017) which were:

- Shared labour for a common purpose - combined effort for a common purpose with a focus on students / pupils and their learning.
- Parity and the link to productive dialogue-working productively as well as building relationships.
- A safe forum for professional challenge - making choices about practice which go beyond monitoring of quality and performance management type processes.

While instructional coaching has a sound research basis its widespread adoption in English schools with their own cultures and practices might suggest we need to tread carefully and with a curious stance rather than a gung-ho one.