

## In the Classroom 99

# How do Instructional Coaches Help Instructors

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**Stan Skrabut:** Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me, and I really appreciate it. I have to really apologize; this episode is a week late. For the past couple weeks, I have been moving from Western New York to Eastern Massachusetts two weeks in a row. I have traveled from Boston to Buffalo by train, and then drove a truck packed full of household goods back to Massachusetts. It was exhausting, I'm whipped. Basically, I just ran out of time. I ran out of time; I ran out of internet. I ran out of opportunity to squeeze in the episode.

I tried to fit it all in, but when we moved into our apartment, they packed it so tight, I couldn't even get to my computer, so first priorities were setting up the bed and the couch. Now I'm back at my computer, and ready to go. I don't think I'll have this type of delay in the future, at least the near future. Right now, I'm settled in Massachusetts. I've been at my job for six weeks, and I am enjoying the heck out of it. Other good news is we just passed 5,000 downloads for this podcast. Once again, thank you ever so much for listening, and let's go onto today's episode.

Today I want to talk about an activity that's used in many high-performing arenas but vastly underutilized in education. What I'm talking about is coaching. Atul Gawande highlighted in *The New Yorker* article that research has confirmed that the big factor in determining how much students learn is not class size or the extent of standardized testing, but the quality of the teacher. Apparently, the quality of the teachers can make up for a lot in terms of student performance, and coaching can help improve this quality of instruction.

Right now, typically, professional development takes the form of workshops and conferences. However, there is often no follow-through. All these great things that you're learning in conferences, there is really no follow-through, so very often, they get shelved and nothing happens with them. However, coaching can provide the follow-through, and it can also be combined with the workshop and conference participation. You can actually marry those two worlds together to go to improved performance.

Now, the reason I'm interested is I'm an instructional technologist. One of my jobs is to help coach faculty into the next level of performance, and I take that role on very seriously. I'm very enthusiastic about it, and I've had the opportunity to serve as a coach for a handful of faculty during my career. When I'm talking about coaching, I'm talking about long-term interaction focused on changing a behavior or learning a new skill. The results have been extremely positive that we have really transformed some

classes. Unfortunately, over the period of 20-some years, a majority of faculty have not taken me up on my offer to help coach them, and I think it's a shame.

Why is it that instructors do not use coaching? First of all, they are self-conscious. They don't like to be observed. They don't like somebody coming into their domain. They are considered the experts, and they don't like somebody looking at them. To add to that, there is a fear that a coach will make them look incompetent, and this may be, in large, part of how the coaching was done or just not understanding how coaching should be done.

There is also a big fear that coaches will report back to their supervisor, to the department chairs, their deans, vice presidents about what transpired. For me, one of the opportunities is that I've had to do quality reviews on online courses. I never reported to anyone other than to that faculty member, that's it. That's a fear that's out there, that this will be used as part of their tenure process or part of their evaluations and unfounded. Also, they do not think coaches will be useful.

Out in the world outside the walls of higher education, there's a lot of industries who do, in fact, use coaches regularly. I'm just going to highlight a couple, the National Football League. I'm sitting here off to the side, the football's playing, and while I'm drafting this, I'm watching some football games. In a National Football League, a team has a roster of 55 players, with 48 eligible players for a game day. The coaching staff consists of 15 coaches, and these coaches specialize on one aspect of the game whether it's strength or conditioning or it could be offense or defense. It could be linebackers; it could be running backs. They have specific coaches that are focused on a certain part of the game.

A quarterback who is typically one of the leaders of the time can interact with four to seven coaches. Some of these quarterbacks, if I think of Kansas City Chiefs' quarterback, Mahomes, he has a contract for \$500 million. I believe it's 500 million, and he has seven coaches helping him just improve one aspect of the game, and that's taking him to the next level.

According to the Hay Group, 25% to 45% of Fortune 500 companies use executive coaches at a cost of \$500 per hour on average. Some CEOs are paying tens to a hundred thousand dollars for the benefit of a coach to help them improve some aspect of their job. Coaches are typically called on to develop high potentials or facilitate a transition. They're there to act as a sounding board or help behaviors that are derailing.

In higher ed, we're constantly asking students to seek out coaches and other academic services. We call them tutors, but basically, they're coaches. We're asking them to go see a writing tutor to improve their writing performance. These are typically multiple sessions, and students benefit tremendously from them. For faculty, we really don't eat our own dog food like we should. There are different opportunities. I'm really just focusing on instructional technology because I'm selfish in that way, that I want to be utilized more. That I want to work with faculty to help them develop better courses and get to the next level and learn out new skills. The

faculty are not utilizing the resources around them, in my opinion, to the degree that they should.

Why should you use a coach? One reason that you may want to use a coach is when you hit a plateau. When your teaching is no longer a challenge, it's no longer interesting, you're just mailing it in; you may have perfected a certain set of methods that you're using, and it's not giving you that fulfillment that it should. You should be jazzed when you come to instruct your students, but if you're just like, " Ugh, same old stuff," maybe it's time to get a coach and work on a specific area and take it to the next level. It makes it more mentally engaging for you, and your students will certainly appreciate it.

When you're mailing it in, you notice, and trust me, your students notice. When you are not excited and passionate about what you're doing, folks notice, so sometimes it's time to try new methods. It could be that you identify an area you want to improve or something new that you want to learn. When it comes to education, there are countless strategies, technologies, and approaches. There's always something new to learn, and having a coach is a great way to do it. Also, the profession continues to evolve. If you're teaching the same way you learned 20 years ago or started out teaching 20 years ago, you're missing out on a lot of new developments in education, especially on how students learn.

Also, technologies are constantly evolving. There's new technologies coming online, other technologies are being discontinued. Even how technologies are being used continues to evolve. There's always ways to do it better, and if we don't keep learning, we're going to just fall behind. On the other hand, it's also impossible to learn everything, so even though there's lots of different ways, lots of different strategies out there, it's a matter of focusing and working on just a couple of things at a time. There's always many ways to learn how to do something new.

My dissertation focused on informal learning and different strategies. All these workshops, reading, checking out journals, and things like that, those are certainly informal learning strategies and coaching actually is one of the informal learning strategies, but coaching is a way to improve quickly. Coaches are not just for classroom improvement. Coaches are not just for raising the level of performance in your classroom. You can also use coaching for other ways but, for me, I'm looking at classroom improvement, but if you are a faculty member at a new institution, you may have a coach that just coaches you or helps you navigate higher education; how things are done at that institution.

Could be that you're into a new position and, for example, the role that I have taken on, I'm also responsible for a library. Honestly, I have never worked in a library before, but yet I'm responsible for one. Trust me, I am seeking out coaches to help me learn how to do this as effectively and efficiently as possible. Another way that you can use coaching is just to improve time management. I watch staff, faculty, students do tasks using computers that are not very efficient and that end up sucking up time.

Sitting down and coaching somebody, even though it may take a little time to learn new strategies, once those strategies are take hold, then time is saved. You'll get that time back if that's really possible, but you will end up saving time. For example, I talk about TextExpander. Matter of fact, I am an affiliate for TextExpander. I think it's an amazing tool. I have been just using it to grade program plans and I have saved probably 9-15 hours just reviewing program plans and using that tool just to speed up processes. There's ways that you can do this, but you have to be open to it.

Being able to improve your academic writing for a lot of faculty, part of their duties are to write journal articles, do research and write, but how to do it, how to get published, that is still a challenge for many people. That's still a challenge for me. If it was something I was doing regularly, I would be seeking out folks who had success with it and learn from them on how to do it and do it efficiently. There are some individuals who are tremendously prolific in getting published in journals, and it's just a matter of possibly working with them and being an understudy in how to do it. Also, tenure and promotion. What's the processes for that and having somebody guide you through that, that is quite useful.

Another reason why you would use a coach is coaching occurs during your normal duty hours and normal working hours. For typical professional development, instructors have to interrupt their routine to go attend an event, whether it's a workshop or a conference. There may be cases where these events have no relevance to their personal needs. You learn a lot of great things; I grant you that. I love going to conferences, it opens up my eyes to a lot of different strategies that I may want to implement, but then I have to go figure it out typically on my own. As I mentioned earlier, having a coach can speed up that process.

You may go to a workshop or a conference and get a glimpse of something that you want to implement into your classroom and bring that back to your coach and your coach can help set you on a path so that you can learn that. The nice thing about coaches, these are weaved into your daily routine. The only additional session is probably the one-on-one conversation that you have with your coach to debrief what they're seeing, what they're hearing as far as observing how you're performing.

With coaching, having that repetition that it's spread out over your term helps allow for this incremental change and long-lasting change because your coach can see how you're performing and offer suggestions where you can do improvement. What do coaches do actually? First of all, coaches observe, judge, and guide. Coaches cannot tell you what to do because really, they have no position of authority. However, they can offer suggestions, then it's up to you to put those suggestions into motion.

If you take a coach's advice, the coach will help guide you to the change in performance that you're seeking. If you invite a coach into your classroom, they can see what you cannot see. This is typically because you're too close to the teaching and learning event. If you're looking to improve your classroom, one of the best strategies is just invite a coach in, have that coach watch what you're doing and make notes, and then debrief after the fact.

Coaches also speed up learning time, and the reason they do this or can do this is they have access to resources or they can vet resources to help you save time and energy. If you went to a workshop, you found a strategy you want to use, having a coach help you implement that strategy, they can go through their resources or find resources, vet those resources to help you get on a path very rapidly. In my arsenal, I have been squirreling away articles on all kinds of topics.

When somebody asks me what I know about a certain topic, I already probably have a library talking about that topic of articles that I've vetted, that I thought were useful, that I can provide almost immediately to get them moving in the right direction. Coaches can help identify efficient and effective paths to success. One of the ways they do this is they listen. That coaches should spend more time observing and listening than speaking. They also do this through dialogue that they will ask questions, listen, ask other questions, listen some more, and really try to guide you to the right answer almost in a Socratic way.

Like I said, coaches provide supports to help. That they have supports that will help you implement that necessary change. These supports should certainly lead to success. How do you go about using a coach? First of all, you decide upon the behavior. You get to make the decision to use a coach. I'm advocating that you use a coach; that you identify something you want to change, find a coach to help you do that. We use coaches for all kinds of different things.

If you're playing tennis, you may have a coach helping you with your back-end or your serve. Why don't we use coaches in our classroom? You have to make the decision to use a coach. You need to decide what you want to learn or improve or change. Then with your coach, you make a plan to do exactly that. Coaching is a process. It's a pretty straightforward process. It starts with what you want to change, so that's your goal. Setting your goal. Then there's an observation period. There's an assessment period and then communication. Then that cycle starts again until you have acquired the skill that you wanted to acquire. That process goes round and round and round.

Importantly, I would say involve the coach. Research has shown that when you actively use a coach, you will have the greatest levels of improvement. This means inviting the coach into your classroom, into your online class, whatever that you're working with, you're inviting your coach in there for them to observe, take notes, and then offer suggestions for improvement. The more sessions that you have, this will lead to improved performance, but you also have to put into motion suggestions that they're offering, or when you commit to a suggestion that you actually work on that so the next time you have a coaching session, that there will be improvement.

Once upon a time, I was taking guitar lessons. Basically, it was a guitar instructor, my problem is I didn't have time to practice. I would get assigned things to work on, but I didn't do it. As a result, I still can't play a guitar. Had I put into motion what that instructor was teaching me or wanting me to work on, I could probably play a guitar by now, but right now I can't. The bottom line with this coaching as a tool Gawande stated is that coach teachers were more effective and their students did better on tests. By using a coach to improve the performance you, in turn, ended up with

better student performance. I think that's a great reason to use coaches in your classrooms, in your instruction.

As I mentioned, through my failures, one way to improve your performance is through deliberate practice. This is where you work specifically on one item trying to make that adjustment that your coach can be your eyes and ears to give you a perspective that you cannot observe. That it's really hard to see yourself instructing. In your mind, you think you may be doing a great job but when the reality is, when you see it, there may be needs for improvement. The power of coaching comes through discussion. A good coach will use discussion and questions to help you develop your knowledge and skills.

If you don't want the coach actually in your classroom, another strategy is to videotape yourself. There was this wonderful article and I put it into the show notes from *The New Yorker*, from Atul Gawande, and he is a surgeon, he's a doctor. He is a surgeon and one of the strategies aside from using a coach is he also videotapes his time in the operating room. You can do this in your class. That you videotape your class and then you sit down with a colleague to debrief because you will certainly see things in your instruction but your coach or colleague will be able to see other things and then you just compare notes and talk about it.

Gawande, he looked at this like reviewing game tape. Sports do an amazing job of looking at game tape. Professional athletes and I'll pick on football, they watch a lot of film looking for how to improve their performance but also how to improve for the audience that they're working with; the next team looking for strategy. Also, other athletes will do this. In swimming, it was also common to have a video camera as you swam so you could look at your stroke mechanics, and then you were able to make adjustments to your swim-stroke and therefore improve.

Also, when using a coach one of the things you really want to do is minimize the paperwork. Between you and the coach, it should not be a lot of writing and documenting. There may be notes taken but the documentation that's really important is having a list of action items. A list of specific things that you're going to work on between coaching sessions and that list is also something the coach the next time they sit down with you is to hold you accountable to depending on what you agree upon. It's an agreed-upon set of actions that you're going to take. That's the major documentation. The coach may take notes so they can provide good feedback in a debrief but really the main key points here, what actions are you going to be taking between coaching sessions.

Be committed. If you're going to use a coach then you have to take it serious. You have to honor your commitments. If an area of improvement develops out of a coaching session, you must strive to put it into motion before the next coaching session, otherwise, it's just a waste of time. You're wasting your time, you're wasting your coaches' time, they could be doing other things. If you're going to take on a coach, really strive to work on improving what you're looking to improve. I recognize fully how busy instructors are, but I'm also very confident that some of the improvements resulting from time with the coach, time practicing will, in the end, save time but also improve performance.

The last thing as far as working with a coach, measure your results. Measure the results of your improvement. Identify actions to move forward. If possible, use data for data-informed decisions and they will also guide your coaching initiatives, the things that you have to work on. There you have it. I think this is an under-utilized opportunity in higher ed for a number of reasons, but as opposed to just going to workshops and conferences, coaching will actually help you put those new ideas into practice.

They're finding through research that coaching sessions are outperforming these other typical professional development methods. If you have a school that has instructional technologists and designers, put them to work. Go, try to use them as somebody that can coach you to the next level in your class. I think you'll appreciate it. I know they certainly will. In the end, your students will appreciate it. With that, here's a quick plug for my book.