

Collaboration and community

# Coaching in learning networks

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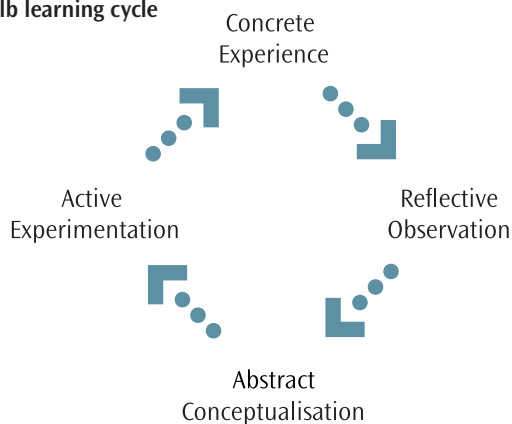
Learning networks, combined with formal coaching practices, which incorporate the principles of critical action research, may provide the right ingredients for radical and sustained change to occur in practitioners' practices: in schools and in school systems if the necessary skills for such professional ways of working have also been developed. The practice of coaching is based on the need to provide support and challenge in teacher development. It incorporates beliefs in practitioners-as-learners practitioners-as-knowers – the validation of practitioners as theory makers. It recognises the importance of operating at the interface of theory and practice and a desire to alter the traditional relationships between professionals and between institutions. The coaching process should be reciprocal and dynamic, meeting practitioners' individual and changing needs.

### Professional learning

New professional practices are necessary for the development of learning communities that will lead to radical, transformative practices in schools. Rather than leave goal setting, peer observation and feedback to individual initiative and to chance, as research indicates it most often is (Robertson, 1997, Tomlinson, 1999), networked learning can be enhanced by establishing and supporting formal coaching relationships between practitioners.

A useful framework for exploring successful transformation at the individual and at the school level is Kolb's (1984) adult learning theory. Learning networks on their own may not provide practitioners with all four aspects of this adult learning process. Peer coaching provides a cohesive, constructivist methodology for continuing professional development.

**Figure 1: Kolb learning cycle**



Each of these phases has essential elements for new learning and changes in practice to occur.

### Experiencing

The daily roles, tasks and experiences of practitioners provide opportunities for effective learning to occur. This type of learning is more likely to enhance intellectual independence and self-direction in the professional development process. Drawing on these experiences and building on prior experiences and knowledge assists practitioners with the construction of new learning.

### Reflecting

Reflection on previous actions will help to bring practitioners to a state of openness in which they are prepared to seek out new strategies and behaviours. There are times when practitioners' attitudes and values need to be challenged before they will be open to changing the ways in which they work, and there are other times when new experiences will initiate a change of values and beliefs and therefore future actions. The skills of coaching are necessary prerequisites for practitioners to be able to develop effective strategies to ensure such reflective questioning occurs, both in individual and group situations.

### Conceptualising

The process of linking of theory and practice is important for practitioners to be able to formulate new concepts about their practice. These new concepts often need to come from outside the school or learning community to provide challenges to previous ways of knowing and thinking about learning and teaching. Learning networks can play a very important role in this phase of the learning process if practitioners are challenged to reflect critically and think about their work. The skills of coaching create opportunities for effective dialogue to occur.

### Experimenting

After abstract conceptualisation and visualising new ways of working, practitioners are more likely to be ready to try new experiences and feel confident to experiment actively with different concepts and ideas. This experimentation with new ideas would then be based on the learning gained from critical reflection on previous experiences. Schön (1983) called this reflection-in-action.

*'It is this whole process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners sometimes deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts.'* (p 50)

Coaching assists practitioners to be reflective in action, on action and for future action, which results in a knowledge of practice, which is essential in a complex environment that characterises education today.

### Crossing borders

Reciprocal coaching, involving shadowing in different education contexts, requires learners to cross over professionally formed 'borders' to view others' ways of working (Giroux, 1992). Access to others' work in education is often limited and 'boundary breaking leadership' is required to create access across boundaries between practitioners and students, between schools and other organisations in the community, between cultures, between nations, between theory and practice, between different stakeholders in education (Robertson & Webber, 2002). The greater the amount of trust, the greater the transfer of knowledge across borders. The close individual relationships established through coaching will increase the amount of trust developed in the learning network as a whole.

Learning networks are effective vehicles for creating opportunities for border crossing over domains of learning but coaching is also necessary to assist practitioners to recognise the gap between their espoused theories (from co-constructed knowledge) to their new theories in action.

*'Coaching bridges the gap between aspiration and achievement...since coaching is about change, it will support high performance through the process of change.'*

Tomlinson, 2002, p 1188

Skills are essential to the coaching process, because it is the use of these skills that will assist practitioners to create new ways of learning with their professional colleagues.

### Coaching skills are the passports

Practitioners' interactions with their colleagues become more in-depth as they develop the skills to work effectively on critical reflection in practice. In this way coaching will enhance the work of the network.

*'The key to success of professional learning communities is seen as the increased efficacy within the community.'*

Silins & Mulford, 2002, p 566

The skills of coaching need to be taught, practised and coached, perhaps with the assistance of an outside facilitator. The skills for effective coaching include:

- self-assessment
- goal setting
- developing action plans
- setting time frames
- observing and describing practice
- active listening
- reflective questioning

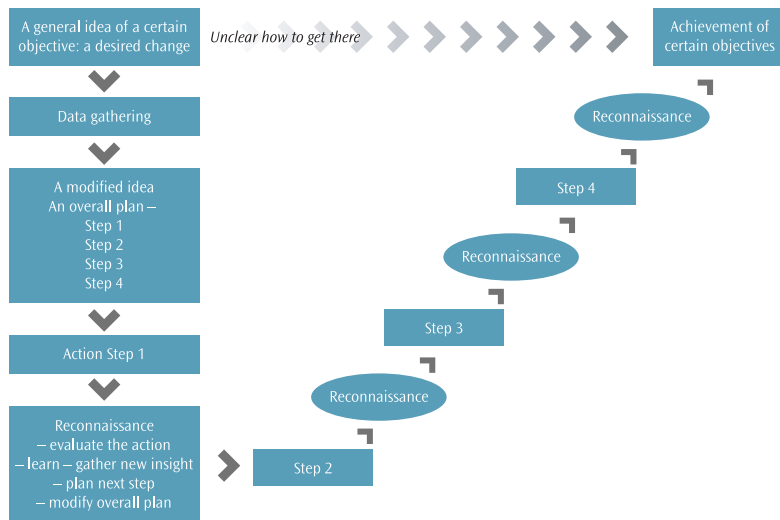
- giving descriptive and evaluative feedback
- critically reflecting on practice
- a knowledge of the action research and change process

When there is regular coaching, practitioners move beyond conversations and simple day-to-day problem solving into cycles of action research and dialogue as they work towards their individual and school goals.

### From networks and coaching to action researchers

Practitioners will not necessarily set out to undertake ‘action research’ – cycles of action informed by research on those actions. Their systematic processes and action plans will evolve naturally over time as they work towards their goals, supported by the regular meetings of the learning network and their coaches.

**Figure 2: The action research process**



Robertson, 2004

The continuing processes of action research can be fostered by allowing practitioners time to reflect upon the goals they are setting in the network. Practitioners develop an initial individual plan, of which the first step is usually more data gathering in their classrooms or schools. Practitioners carry out their first action(s), with or without the observation and feedback from their coach, and then reflect on the outcomes of the action and the necessary directions to take from this stage. They evaluate, they learn from their actions, they plan the next step and then they modify their overall plans. The practitioners then carry out their next action and go through cycles of action steps and reconnaissance before arriving at the desired outcome. The coach provides descriptive and evaluative feedback at stages throughout the process. Networks are able to provide opportunities for critical reflection through multiple perspectives around pedagogy and learning.

The collaborative nature of any coaching programme is a key feature in leading educators into action research processes. The ‘conscience’ type effect of coaching in the learning network will encourage and support practitioners as they move systematically towards their goals. Coaching will assist practitioners to move from the ‘ideas generation’ within the network to the change that is needed at the individual level of implementation for school-wide and system-wide transformation to occur.

### **In summary**

Learning networks provide a structure for professional autonomy and leadership. This is paramount for the development of the profession and for the recognition of the importance of professional knowledge. However, it is equally important that we do not just continue to reinvent the status quo and homogeneity in education – and that we are able to be innovative and transformative in our work. Learning networks provide an important vehicle for the co-construction and the transfer of knowledge. Changes in individuals’ practices may be, therefore, where the focus needs to lie. Coaching skills and practices will not only enhance the dialogue in learning networks, but coaching will also support and challenge practitioners to change systems, policies and practices back in their own context.

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