

## **“Teacher Centered Coaching”: An Instructional Coaching Model**

*Sonia Wang*

**University of Chicago Charter Schools**

*This action research sought to develop an instructional coaching model that would consistently and effectively support teachers in their classroom practices. The model that was studied in this research adapted several components of other coaching models; the specific roles that are assumed by the coach, in particular during the debriefing reflection component, showed a particular impact on developing the instructional practice of teachers. The study analyzed these specific coaching roles, along with the relevant questions for each role, to find that this particular model takes on a teacher-centered approach, prioritizing the teacher by putting them at the center of the process, starting with their reflections and ending with their own action plans for their instructional growth.*

### **“Teacher Centered Coaching”: An Instructional Coaching Model**

Question: This is my first year coaching after 15 years in the classroom and I had no idea that coaching was this hard. I'm really struggling and don't know what to do. I work with 8 teachers, not too many, I have a great boss, and mostly I like this work. But it's SO hard! I'm completely exhausted by the end of every day, I'm always questioning what I'm doing, and I really wonder if I'm helping anyone. Was it this hard for you? Is it this hard for all coaches?

Response: [I love] coaching, but it is cognitively, emotionally, and sometimes even physically exhausting...I need to be acutely, constantly tuned into the coachee's nonverbal communication so that I can make sure I'm maintaining trust...It's my responsibility to facilitate his/her learning--there's a lot to consider in order for that to happen. (Aguilar, February 2013)

The exasperation shared by the first coach and the assurance provided by the second are true to my experience, as well, as an instructional coach. Coaching, similar to teaching, is not a profession that can be done by anyone and everyone. It is not an opportunity to ease the workload of a classroom teacher. The work of an instructional coach is complex and challenging, but I believe it is a critical component to push teachers and schools from being good to great. It is imperative for a coach and for a school invested in providing coaching to explore the question of how one can offer a consistent and thoughtful coaching model within the school context.

After teaching for five years and mentoring pre-service teachers, I was asked to step into a coaching position in a school where formal coaching had never existed. After a few months, I began formally collecting data from the teachers I was coaching in an effort to crystalize a framework for a coaching model that could be used within a school context. I hoped that would help me come to some conclusions about which components within a school and within the coaching process are necessary to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning.

I work at the University of Chicago Charter School-Woodlawn Campus, a charter school in Chicago, which serves a student population of approximately 600 in grades 6-12. Ninety-nine percent of our students identify as African-American and 83% of our students receive free/reduced lunch. We pride ourselves on the data metrics we achieve based on test scores, on-track (having C's or better) and GPA rates, and college acceptance rate. The class of 2015, for example, had a college acceptance rate of 100% and, relative to all schools in the nation, our 2015 Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) results showed our growth rates in math and reading to be better than 77% and 78%, respectively, of all other schools. There is approximately 60 staff total, including middle school, high school, support services, and administration; a large percentage of the staff is often new to the profession, either as career changers or directly from a teacher education program. In the past five years, the middle school where I coach has developed a culture where there is a growing, collaborative trust amongst staff and between staff and administration.

With the emerging tension regarding what it means to be a teacher and the efforts to professionalize teaching, I believe it is critical to empower teachers through their work in and out of the classroom in order for them to empower their students. Teaching should not be a job that is prepared for and carried out in isolation. In the same way teachers work to establish and build a positive, warm learning community in their classrooms, a learning community must be established in schools for our teachers. Therefore, as an instructional coach, I chose to conduct action research to explore the question: How can I offer a consistent and thoughtful coaching model in my school?

In this role, I have been intentional to position myself as a collaborator, one whose objective is to support and push my teachers to become better teachers, and not to position myself as an evaluator. As I build positive relationships with my teachers, I am able to facilitate a learning relationship that allows me to check on them when needed as well as to affirm them in their instructional practice. I began coaching during the 2012-2013 school year, and this study encompasses my first year. Then, as now, I coached all English Language Arts and Social Studies teachers on a weekly basis, involving observations (usually between 50-70 minutes), debriefing sessions, and additional planning, co-teaching, and conducting "looking at student work" sessions as needed. The latter could include providing specific feedback on lesson plans that teachers submit; helping co-plan, as needed, whole or parts of lessons, with a deliberate focus on being a co- rather than lead teacher; modeling instruction; and generally making myself available as necessary outside of formally scheduled times. My ultimate priority has been to support all teachers to develop their practice so that their students, in turn, can maximize their learning experiences.

My main research question (*How can I offer a consistent and thoughtful coaching model in my school?*), along with the following sub-questions, guided my work as both coach and action researcher, and helped me examine my own professional development in regards to what it means to be a supportive and effective coach.

1. What aspect of my coaching role has the most impact on my teachers?
2. What are the different roles I take on during coaching and why? What are the types of questions I ask my teachers as they correspond to my role during debriefing sessions and why?
3. What are teachers getting out of coaching?

### **What Do We Know about Coaching?**

Hallway monitor. Social worker. Nurse. Breakfast provider. Greeter. Academic counselor. Number one fan. The list goes on of all the hats teachers wear outside of the instruction that takes center stage in the classroom. It is no wonder that our teachers experience burn out too often and too soon. According to an article in *Catalyst Chicago*, an online education-focused newsmagazine:

In CPS [Chicago Public Schools] as a whole, annual attrition is 18 percent. Of those, about 40 percent of teachers transfer to another CPS school, but a growing number head for suburban districts. And as the Consortium on Chicago School Research has shown, turnover is worst where poverty is highest. Catalyst's analysis found that among 132 schools where more than 90 percent of students are low-income minorities, a third of schools lost more than half their teachers between 2008 and 2012 (Forte, 2014).

While this article illuminates the state of CPS as a whole, as a charter school teacher it was interesting to also learn that charter educators tend to turn over at even higher rates than teachers in neighborhood public schools. According to Torres (2014, p. 5), "multi-year averages show that teacher turnover in charter schools is around 20% to 25% nationally and in various state contexts (Gross & DeArmond, 2010; Miron & Applegate, 2007; Silverman, 2012, 2013; Stuit & Smith, 2010), which is about twice as high as the national average at traditional urban public schools (Stuit & Smith, 2010)." It has been suggested that longer school days, leadership changes, and larger workloads lead to swifter teacher burnout and tend to be the significant factors in charter teacher turnover.

Naturally, the question to then ask is what can be done about this? Our students need and deserve high-quality instruction in addition to consistent support, especially our students who live in urban environments where teacher transience is all too often an expectation rather than a rare occurrence. However, in order to maintain our students as our main priority, teacher development must also be prioritized and supported. Some schools and districts have turned to the coaching model as a means to support teachers in the multi-faceted work that they engage in daily.

### **Purposes of Coaching**

Elena Aguilar, who has written a useful book on coaching (Aguilar, 2013) and who has coached classroom teachers for 12 years, offers a definition of coaching as "a process that can move a person from where he is to where he wants to be. A coach needs to "enroll" a teacher.... *A teacher has to want it...* Once the teacher has been enrolled, the coach should help her determine goals for her practice..." (Aguilar, 2011).

The assumption is that when teachers are given time to reflect on their existing practices, they are able to critically reconsider their habits and then make intentional changes that can ultimately impact their instruction. Having access to someone, such as a coach, allows for greater accountability and encouragement in moving through this process.

In addition, coaching allows teachers to receive professional development that is uniquely suited for them since coaching is based on individual teachers' needs. This individualized support is especially important in recognizing the unique strengths and needs each teacher brings to a school; in the same way we should not impose a one-size-fits-all curriculum for our students, we should not assume that one type of professional development will meet the needs of all of our educators. Where professional development workshops may provide new ideas, coaching provides a space for teachers to transfer their learning from the workshop to their own classroom with the support of their coach. Gill, Kostiw, and Stone (2010) suggest "coaching addresses key principles of effective professional learning by being evidence-informed and sensitive to the context of the teacher's work" (p. 49).

### **Coaching Models**

There are different models that can be utilized as a coach to reap successful outcomes. Models can vary in different ways: objectives, processes, points of focus, and so on. Below are two models that have been implemented in school contexts. These models are helpful in understanding the variety of coaching approaches that can be utilized, though it may not be necessary for a coach to follow a particular model rigidly.

### **Student-Focused Coaching**

Student-focused coaching (SFC) is a coaching model most commonly used by reading coaches and has been defined as "a cooperative, ideally collaborative relationship with parties mutually engaged in efforts to provide better services for students" (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2007, p. 690). Some components of this model that make it student-focused include its primary goal of improving students' reading skills and competence, and its interventions which are designed and implemented based on student assessments. With SFC, coaches work with teachers to accurately and precisely identify the targeted concern of a teacher's classroom practice through the collection and analysis of data obtained from interviews, observations, assessments or a review of a student records. When coaches visit classrooms, they gather more data from observing student responses to interventions and instructional strategies that coaches and teachers set as a result of their sessions. A unique component of SFC is the position coaches take with regards to their teacher; coaches "avoid taking on the role of the "expert," dispensing advice to teachers about how they can improve their instruction... [instead] they work together to overcome obstacles to students' progress" (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2007, p. 691). While the problem-solving component of SFC is backed up by a substantial amount of research, data is still emerging to support SFC as an effective coaching model for teachers and the field of education.

## Cognitive Coaching

The cognitive coaching model is built on research findings which showed “student achievement would be higher in the classrooms of teachers who interacted more extensively with their coaches...[and] positively correlated with the use of personnel resources which was represented by coaches” (Ross, 1992, in Shidler, 2009, p. 454). Shidler’s review of the research, and her own study of early childhood teachers and their experience with coaching, found a link between close, consistent modeling and increased levels of efficacy reported by teachers, which in turn had an impact on student achievement in the classroom. Coaches utilizing the cognitive coaching model balance their time between four components: instructing for specific content, modeling techniques and instructional practices, observing teacher practices, and dedicating consultative hours to work with teachers when children are not present in order to better facilitate reflection (Shidler, 2009). In other words, this coaching model emphasizes an approach that involves modifying teacher practices through direct instruction by coach to teacher and then application of the learning in real time in the classroom. Other research has offered evidence that cognitive coaching positively impacts student achievement (González Del Castillo, 2015; Rinaldi, 2013) and enhances teachers’ sense of efficacy (Robinson, 2011; Wooten Burnett, 2015).

These coaching models offer two types of approaches that can be used to support teachers and improve student achievement. Given the variety of models available, it is important to develop a coaching model that factors in a school’s context as well. To this end, I combined elements of both coaching styles in my own work, utilizing, for example, grounding coaching conversations around students and data (SFC) as well as balancing the varied roles I played as a coach (as found to be most effective with the cognitive coaching model).

In addition, in my own learning about coaching, I became familiar with a coaching style originating in the field of pharmacy (Tofade, 2010). This “co-active” model helped me develop a debriefing process—in which the answers and solutions come from those being coached rather than the coach—that I incorporated into my work with teachers. The task of the coach here is to ask guided questions of the coached, which supports their *own* formulation of action steps or conclusions, rather than the coach simply giving the answer to the coached directly.

## Methodology

The main question for this action research was *how can I offer a consistent and thoughtful coaching model in my school?* In order to come to conclusions about this overall focus, I decided to examine different elements of the coaching process, to better understand its impact on the teachers I work with. The data will be discussed in relation to this main research question as well as the following sub-questions:

1. What aspect of my coaching role has the most impact on my teachers?
2. What are the different roles I take on during coaching and why? What are the types of questions I ask my teachers as they correspond to my role during debriefing sessions and why?
3. What are teachers getting out of coaching?

## Participants

The three key participants in this action research were the English/Language Arts teachers for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, who have been teaching for five, three, and one year(s) respectively. I am calling them RN, KC, and SX (pseudonyms) respectively.

## Data Collection Tools and Analysis

Since this action research was an attempt to provide structure to a process that did not have a formal set of pre-existing steps, I used a mixture of data collection tools that resulted in both qualitative and quantitative data. My hope was to learn about an effective coaching model through closely examining my own approach to coaching. These tools included my narrative reflections in my teaching journal entries, surveys completed by teachers that asked for their ratings on the helpfulness of the coaching process, audio recordings of our debriefing reflection sessions, and my observation tracker, which recorded the amount of and types of interactions I had with my teachers.

## Teaching Journals

My teaching journals were a place for me to reflect on my journey transitioning into the role and for unpacking what it means to be an instructional coach as I considered the different components and methods. This was a place for me to reflect on (and vent about) the obstacles and setbacks I encountered. I also recorded observations of my teachers as we learned to work together in our coach-teacher relationship; reflected on the impact that I had on teachers, students, and the school; and tracked what I learned in this coaching role. I did my best to journal at least once every 3-4 weeks as I conducted this action research. Before journaling, I would refer back to my previous entry to draw on intentional steps I made based on the previous entry and what had transpired since in the targeted areas I was trying to help teachers improve upon.

## Teacher Surveys

Three different online surveys were administered—at the beginning of January, beginning of April, and mid-June (see Appendix). I administered these surveys to support teachers' reflection on their growth at various points in the school year and to capture a general idea of teachers' impressions of and takeaways from coaching that could be shared anonymously. The surveys asked teachers to rate coaching components and answer open-ended questions about the coaching process. The rating scale used 1 as an indicator for *not helpful* and 5 as *very helpful*.

I analyzed the data by examining the ratings to determine which elements of coaching were perceived as effective and which were not, and by coding the open-ended responses to determine what was working with the coaching and what changes might be warranted. I looked for frequency of certain words or phrases across all responses for each open-ended question; for example, in the second survey I asked teachers to unpack their high ratings from the first survey for the "Debriefing Reflection" sessions. All three teachers used the words "scheduled," "intentional space," and "acknowledged" to describe why they valued debriefing reflection

sessions so highly. These words let me know that teachers appreciated having a set time when there would be an opportunity to debrief their instruction; a designated place where they could process and reflect on what did or did not work in the classroom; and an active listener who would acknowledge their classroom challenges and decisions while reinforcing their expertise. These responses, in addition to their identification of the debriefing sessions as the most helpful coaching component, pushed me to evaluate in depth what I was doing during those times.

### Debriefing Sessions

Debriefing sessions are 45-60 minute blocks for collaborative reflection on the classroom observation from the week as well as going over any other problems of practice the teacher brought to the table. This might include looking at student work and drawing conclusions or considering next steps, co-planning as needed, and action planning and goal setting at the end of each trimester. For this study, a total of eight debriefing sessions, which varied in length from 25 minutes to an hour, were audio recorded and analyzed. While these debriefing sessions were not fully transcribed, I listened to each at least three times and took notes on my word choices, language, and ways I attempted to respond to teachers' stated concerns, challenges, and reflections throughout the session. For example, I noted that I often responded with "Say more about that" during conversations in an effort to push teachers to unpack their initial thoughts. By listening to the debriefings, I was able to draw some conclusions about the types of questions I tended to ask, and my purpose in asking them. I then categorized the questions, which led to the identification of the different roles I take on during coaching, described in detail below in the findings.

### Observation Tracker

I tracked the frequency of each type of coaching support using a Google Sheets document (see Appendix). According to the tracker, I had conducted a total of 204 full length (60 minute) observations by the end of the year. This did not include pop-in observations, which are briefer. With regards to the three ELA teachers I met with regularly, the frequency and types of supports break down to the following:

Table 1  
*Frequency of Types of Support*

Teacher	Observations	Formal Planning Sessions	Co-Teaching/ Modeling
RN	28	3	2
KC	24 <sup>a</sup>	3	0
SX	34	6	4

<sup>a</sup> on medical leave for five weeks

The numbers differed for each teacher because of their specific individual needs and their initiative in seeking out support. The table does not reflect informal moments where a teacher might grab 15 or 30 minutes during the day to bounce ideas off or look at some student work with me, or the number of debriefing sessions, which occurred weekly even when an observation may not have taken place. The tracker provided a quick snapshot of the progress teachers made

as well as the areas the teacher and I worked on from week to week. I analyzed my tracker every week to look at the teachers' overall progression in their targeted instructional areas. My goal was to revisit the strategies we had identified for these areas and assess their effectiveness, and from there, consider additional work that needed to be done to meet these targets.

### Findings

#### What Aspect of my Coaching Role has the Most Impact on Teachers?

All three teachers rated the debriefing reflection sessions as a "5" each time. These sessions will be analyzed further in the discussion section. Other components of coaching identified as being most helpful were informal observations and co-planning.

Table 2

#### *Teacher Responses to Survey*

<i>How would you rate the following as conducted by your coach?</i>	January			April			June		
	RN	KC	SX	RN	KC	SX	RN	KC	SX
Informal Observations	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	4	5
Co-planning	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5
Co-teaching	4	4	n/a	4	5	n/a	4	5	4
Modeling instruction	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4
Debriefing sessions	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
How would you rate your coaching experiences thus far at UCW?	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	5

Open-ended comments provided additional feedback about teachers' thoughts on coaching over the course of the school year. In January, teachers were asked the question, "Is there anything that your coach can do to improve your coaching experience?" All responses received were positive in that they indicated the teachers wanted to continue coaching as it was currently structured. One teacher stated that she would like to "continue to [be] assist[ed] [with] planning and lesson planning, connection to assessments," while another teacher expressed wanting "more opportunity to do co-teaching." All three responses affirmed the status quo or asked for additional supports.

In April, teacher survey responses to open-ended comments indicated they felt they were continuing to grow professionally. When asked about how coaching had contributed to this growth, each of them indicated that they were developing their own reflection practices due to having a scheduled time to reflect on their teaching with me. Teachers were also asked to comment on traits they observed in me that fostered more effective coaching. Responses indicated they perceived me as aware and insightful, dedicated to them and their growth in the classroom, consistent about providing support and meeting regularly, and able to build rapport, especially important in a role that is meant to push and critically analyze the teacher's practice.



Lastly, in June, at the end of the school year when teachers were asked for a final reflection on the role coaching had played in their teaching over the course of the year, they remained positive about both their personal growth and the impact on their practice. Two of the three teachers responded more comprehensively about suggested improvements than they had in earlier surveys, indicating they wished to have more time reserved for curriculum development coaching. One teacher commented that she would like time to work through “how to infuse content and rigor into the balanced literacy framework. I think this is something I struggled with this year”; another reflected that “more time on developing curriculum as it pertains to the classroom” would be helpful.

### **What are the Roles I Play and Questions I Ask during Coaching and Why?**

The general flow of the debriefing sessions, as it turned out, was sustained by questions that aimed to support the teachers in different and specific ways. Data from the significant exchanges in the debriefing reflection sessions highlighted distinct roles that emerged as I considered my emphasis throughout each session. These roles served to move the session forward with regard to the teacher’s evolving reflections, her conclusions, and action plans for their practice. As I listened to the transcripts, there were particular prompts that I would use in shifting from one role to another. In general, I would describe the roles as:

- **Facilitator:** Providing scaffolding questions to support teachers through their thinking and reflecting. (Examples of prompts for each role can be found in Table 3.)
- **Instructor:** Teaching teachers concrete strategies or presenting ideas using professional texts or by modeling how to teach a specific objective; one encouragement that might be used includes “Here’s what I’ve done before...”
- **Collaborator:** Roleplaying a scenario of a teacher’s instruction or management in the classroom (taking on different roles, either as student or teacher) and brainstorming ideas for a unit plan or daily lesson plan as a team.
- **Empowerer:** Supporting teachers in developing their professional identity and personal agency and voice.

These roles are very distinct; from the recordings, they were often present in every debriefing session. Session data illustrated my movement from role to role as I responded. In addition, I never took on an instructive role for the entire session. In the same manner, I never empowered my teachers without facilitating as well.

Table 3  
*Examples of Questions/Statements for Each Role taken on as a Coach*

Facilitator	
	What's working?
	What's been helping you with...?
	What else is working for you?
	What do you think allowed for this to happen?
	What would be helpful to support you in thinking about...?
	How does that make you feel?
	Talk to me through your thinking process about...
Instructor	
	Does that make sense?
	What are you hearing?
	From my experience, I have/I would...
	I wanted us to unpack this because...
	Hearing this and knowing your students, what do you think might be problematic or applicable?
Collaborator	
	What if we tried....?
	Have you thought about it like this...?
	For this week, here's what I've heard us say for focused, action points...
Empowerer	
	There are a few things I just heard you say...
	You should decide which [lessons] you think students need to focus on from what you know about your students. So what would you want them to do?"
	Are there things that you can take from this situation and apply to other situations?

Table 4  
*Frequency of Role Assumed during Debriefing Reflection Sessions*

Teacher	Facilitator	Instructor	Collaborator	Empowerer
SX 1 (Jan)	8	3	3	4
SX 2 (Feb)	10	5	5	6
SX 3 (Feb)	15	8	3	7
KC 1 (Jan)	12	3	2	10
KC 2 (Jan)	11	5	3	8
RN 1 (Jan)	13	6	3	7
RN 2 (Jan)	11	5	3	6
RN 3 (Feb)	11	3	5	5
<b>Total Averages</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>6.6</b>

As the Table 4 shows, in most sessions, I took on the roles of instructor and collaborator the least. During debriefing reflection sessions, I would take on an instructive role when a strategy that seemed potentially useful to me was not forthcoming from the teacher herself. In these instructive moments, I am the sole speaker and the teacher is a listener. I share my idea, in

essence “teaching” the teacher, but always speak from a place of experience, framing things by sharing “something I’ve done before” or “in my experience.” I know from having been in the classroom that it is harder to be receptive to suggestions when someone just comes into the room and tells you what to do, without a conversation. For this reason, I maintain transparency when I instruct; if I am sharing a strategy that I have never tried, I will openly admit this.

As I analyzed the debriefings, I found my questions tended to reflect the role I took on during any given exchange. Though the frequency with which I assumed these different roles varied depending on the length of the session, I most often took on the role of the facilitator as shown in Table 4. In this role, I spent the most time asking questions. These questions were specific and can be described as *scaffolds* to push the teacher to unpack her thinking around an instructional decision or a student interaction. When I guide teachers to think through their lessons or classes, we often arrive at a point where the teacher determines a key action step that might have otherwise come from me in an instructive manner. It appeared to me that asking teachers to think through why they made a decision or why something worked or did not work bolstered their critical analysis and reflections on their work.

The data shows that there are moments in the empowerer role where, rather than ask a question, I instead provided affirmation for my teachers’ decisions or statements, or I pushed my teachers to make connections from a singular scenario to their work as a whole. I also intentionally brought to light the growth they had achieved, whether from the week before or from the beginning of the year. As someone who had been going into my teachers’ classrooms on a weekly basis for the whole year, I was able to maintain that perspective. Additionally, as someone who actively studied the teachers’ areas of growth and struggle, I had the opportunity to see the larger picture. Therefore, I coined the term “empowerer” for the moments in the session where the teacher and I shared a thinking process where they identified their own growth and/or they saw the larger impact their instructional practice can and does have on their students and classroom. I have learned that engaging in this type of conversation provides professional validation for teachers, which seems to also be connected to increasing their confidence.

At the same time, there are moments where instruction is important and necessary. Instructive moments, however, intentionally weave in opportunities for my teachers to ask questions. In this role, I still asked specific questions to ensure that the lines of communication are open. For example, I would follow up a teaching moment with the question, “What are you hearing?” This question provided an opportunity for my teacher to share with me how they had interpreted both the concrete suggestion as well as the tone with which I delivered the suggestion. I have had teachers in some sessions push back, stating that they did not think that what I was saying was relevant to them. These pushes open up the opportunity for me to explain why I was sharing my instructive support and to connect it to their own practice or to my observation notes.

As a collaborator, the teachers and I engaged in a much more interactive conversation around a specific concern or area to develop. I have assumed a collaborator role in situations that have ranged from dealing with a challenging student to planning a lesson or creating a management system for a specific cohort. Sometimes we participated in role-playing that supported a collaborative decision we had made. Other times, we collaborated by engaging in a brainstorming session together, bouncing ideas off one another while making decisions to create

an actionable outcome. In this role I was neither the sole speaker nor was I necessarily driving the conversation. My teacher and I assumed peer roles.

From the data, I noticed that while I switch between these four roles, the one role that I generally return to is that of the facilitator. Whether I am directly instructing, collaborating with, or empowering my teachers, I am still asking facilitative questions that push my teachers to reflect and unpack their language, choices, and actions.

### **What are Teachers Getting out of Coaching?**

In the end of year survey, teachers were asked to reflect on their growth throughout the school year and whether they believe coaching has played a role in this growth. Responses were submitted in a free-write form, not with prescribed answers to select from. All three teachers reported that through coaching, they had a space and a companion with whom they could talk through their areas of strength and weakness in productive ways. They felt they had moved from simply increasing their own awareness of strengths and “pushes” to creating actionable goals on a weekly basis. SX, for example, captured her thoughts on the connection between her growth and coaching by stating that “as a professional coach and outside observer, you [the coach] also know when and how to move from honoring the teacher’s needs into planning for better teaching. This balance is probably *what I find most beneficial and most impressive about our coaching relationship.*”

As one example of this, RN was struggling with “teacher talk” in her classroom during a mini-lesson; she was spending the majority of class talking *at* her kids and there was not enough time when students could actively engage. I asked her a facilitative question, “What would be helpful to support you in thinking about teacher talk time?” She quickly responded that her thoughts about this had to do with having to repeat directions to her kids too often. My follow up question steered her thinking without telling her what to do; I asked, “So what do you expect of your students during a mini-lesson?” RN identified three main things—slanting, sitting upright, and tracking (following the speaker with their whole body and their eyes). “How would you remind them of these expectations?” I asked. I then modeled exactly what she said as if I were in the classroom: “I need you slanting, tracking, and eyes on me.” She listened and revised this by repeating, “You’re slanting and eyes on me.” At the end of this exchange, the teacher had created a quick catchphrase to redirect her students at the start of and during a mini-lesson, which often took much longer due to constant repetition of verbose directions. To wrap up this exchange, I asked, “How does this feel?” Her response conveyed a lot of excitement. “I think that sounds good, and I like what you said about reminding them and not just telling them, even for the read aloud.” From the responses and reactions of teachers captured in the qualitative data, facilitating their thinking, rather than just telling them what to do, has a positive impact on developing my teachers’ professional practices.

My observation tracker provides evidence of instructional growth in each of my teachers. Sometimes evidence of change is not immediate; it may come a few weeks later as the teacher spends time laying the foundation for that change to take place in the classroom. There were many times when I would enter a classroom and notice improvements in instruction or management that was directly connected to an action point from a month earlier; other times, I

would go in for an observation and find that the action point we had been focusing on was not being addressed or that I was not observing improvements in that particular moment. However, the tracker provided hard and direct evidence that supported the progress (which could be affirmed at a debriefing session) or the lack of progress (which could be discussed). Based on the observation tracker, all three teachers showed comprehensive improvement from the beginning to the end of the school year with regards to the respective and specific professional and instructional goals that were set.

### Discussion

In terms of positive reviews from teachers regarding aspects of coaching, I believe that co-planning and the debriefing reflection sessions are a really interesting combination. To me, co-planning is something very concrete; there is a clear objective and outcome. Debriefing reflection sessions are much less concrete. There is no clear set of “rules” or guidelines and issues can ebb and flow. The fact that both felt helpful tells me that teachers, like our students, appreciate variety in the ways they are supported in their professional growth.

Regarding the roles I take on, it appears that in order to successfully support teachers in all aspects of their instructional practice and specifically support comprehensive debriefing, I must take on the distinct roles as identified—facilitator, collaborator, instructor and empowerer. These distinct roles allow me to support teachers’ reflection on their instructional practice (facilitator), provide encouragement for the hard work they are putting into their practice (empowerer), build up their toolbox for instruction (instructor), and tap into the social aspect of the teaching profession and frankly, what it means to be part of humanity (collaborator). Similarly, the roles move us through the session:

- I set a clear frame for the direction of time (facilitator).
- I draw out the positives and strengths (empowerer).
- We reflect on the problems of practice (facilitator, collaborator, instructor)
- I connect to observation evidence (instructor, facilitator)
- We collectively action plan to specific steps towards instructional growth (collaborator, facilitator)

After analyzing qualitative data from the debriefing reflection sessions, I believe a key reason these sessions are helpful is because they can be characterized as “teacher centered,” and this is reflected in the types of questions I ask teachers as I move between roles. Most teachers are familiar with the teaching strategy known as student-centered instruction (SCI). Traditional instructional approaches with their heavy dependence on teacher-directed learning are avoided; rather, the SCI approach calls for student engagement, immersion, and personal responsibility. This is the same approach that the debriefing reflection sessions take; we might call this “teacher-centered coaching.” I position myself mainly as the facilitator, asking questions that guide teachers to develop their own questions and to reach conclusions, which can then inform an action plan for their practice.

Based on the data, there are two key answers for what teachers get out of coaching: professional support and professional growth. A coach must guide teachers to reflective insight into the

classroom to inform their instruction and classroom activity. It is not effective to just decide on an action plan without allowing teachers to unpack and process their thinking, their emotions, and their beliefs as we look forward.

As a result, there is growth displayed with regards to dispositions—teachers being able to bounce back after a bad class or learning to engage in conversation with an off-track student rather than immediately removing them from the classroom. Being able to go into my teachers' classrooms on a weekly basis and note shifts or setbacks, to unpack with them what happened, and then to strategize how to move forward has been rewarding because on the whole, there is dramatic, effective growth in their practice. My principal also noted instructional growth, citing a shift from his fall formal evaluations to his pop-in observations during the winter and spring trimesters. As a result, it is likely that coaching has had a direct impact on student learning because of the productive work that results

### **Limitations**

One limitation that must be acknowledged regarding the validity of the data is related to the fact that teachers may have felt obliged to be supportive of my coaching and may have felt constrained in offering any criticism. While the survey was anonymous, there were only three participants in this action research work, and the possibility of easy identification might have influenced what teachers decided to share in their survey responses, even though teachers were encouraged to answer candidly. Having established positive, professional relationships with all of my teachers, it is critical for the sake of my research to recognize the possibility that teachers were aiming to “please the coach” through their responses. However, I feel confident that I can take their responses at face value; I believe I established strong relationships founded on transparency and the premise that my role was strictly to support them in becoming better teachers. As a result, my belief is that they would respond to this survey with their honest thoughts and reflection in the same manner they engage with me during debriefings.

Overall, the data suggests that the space coaching provides for reflection and problem solving is important to growth in instructional practices in the classroom. The debriefing reflection sessions, in particular, make room for this work, and during that time, the coach must balance a variety of roles in relation to the teacher.

### **Conclusions: How can I Offer a Consistent and Thoughtful Coaching Model?**

In a journal entry written on January 12 titled “Coaching, In My Own Words,” I reflected on the intricate nature of being a coach, which involves “more proactively learning about instructional practices, management strategies, content, etc. so that my teachers can be that much more supported.” An effective coach does not have all the answers. If a coach were to only depend on their existing bank of knowledge, then there would be a point all teachers would reach where there is no more room to grow. I reflected in this entry, comparing my instructional coaching duties to my volleyball coaching duties, “I have to push them and think strategically of things that would guide them to that place of working...effectively, even if I myself may not be able to do it in a superb manner.” If my teacher is struggling with developing relationships and their disposition is completely different from mine, I can't just give them tools that work for me! I

need to find resources like the article from *Educational Leadership* titled “The Teacher as Warm Demander” (Bondy & Ross, 2008), which I dug out for two of my teachers. But it does not stop there; after we spent time reading through that piece, we then sat and talked through how that text translated to their own practice in the classroom.

A strong coaching model is one that respects and honors the expertise and voice of the teacher. In order for coaching to be productive and for teachers to experience growth, there must be a commitment to the whole idea of coaching on *everyone’s* part. At the core of this commitment is an understanding that coaches serve a key role in pushing and supporting teachers with the teacher’s best interest in mind. Having a full-time staff member whose sole responsibility is to work with teachers and their professional growth speaks volumes about what the school prioritizes. Often schools assert that their number one concern is their students and as a result, strategies to support teachers are put on the backburner; however, by supporting our teachers we ultimately support our students, who teachers engage with on a daily basis.

Teachers deserve a voice in their professional growth. Too often they are being evaluated and then told what is not working and told *what* to change and *how* to change things. In a coaching relationship, the coach must remember that the best means of developing and maintaining an effective relationship is to use a TCC approach. While the coach heavily facilitates and often instructs, collaborates with, and empowers their teachers, ultimately the action steps and goals that drive the coaching needs to be rooted in what the teacher has identified as areas of concern and the data the coach presents from observations. This is an important piece of my coaching model because it affords teachers a place where they are their own agents of change for their professional growth. The teachers are identifying areas to work on for their practice, and this process of identifying action steps comes through a reflective session where the coach has facilitated their thinking and supported their conclusion. In many ways, just as we would want with our students, this method has a more permanent outcome because teachers are allowed voice in the process and owning their conclusions—coming to their own action steps without feeling as though they are just being told what to do.

### **Author Notes**

**Sonia Wang** is a School Director at the University of Chicago Charter School—Woodlawn Middle School Campus.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sonia Wang at [SoniaWang@uchicagocharter.org](mailto:SoniaWang@uchicagocharter.org)

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Appendix A

Current SMART Goal: develop my assessment practices (analyzing my reading conference data every 3 weeks)			Current Instructional Rubric Goal: Instructional Delivery & Cultural Connections: Delivering concise, highly effective mini-lessons that are both rigorous (teach comprehension, interpretation, & writing skills in a way that pushes students to use higher-order and critical thinking skills) and relevant (make connections between the thinking & work we do in class and students' out-of-school lives - their neighborhoods, interests and worldview as adolescents, their home culture and family experiences).	
Date	Time/Cohort	Touchpoint Type	Evidence of Change	Notes/Action Steps
3.8.13	14:15:00	Debriefing		Management – - Seating Chart (sent it to Wang by Saturday - Insistently staying on students - Use analysis of work as a means to keep students on track and conference appropriately (think about grouping students based on where they are in their project) Instructional Delivery – - Clarity as you move into each component
3.13.13	9:45am (BB)	Pop in Observation	Such a cool feel; everyone is working independently and collaboratively on writing. T is moving around supporting students and really pushing the; great evidence of work showing T continues to manage and keep eye out on students...	
3.14.13	2:00pm (BA)	Formal Observation	Multimanager, responsive to student needs	Need to make sure your tone shifts when needed to convey accurate message of expectations

**Appendix B**

**Coaching Survey 1**

Have you received coaching support prior to your work with Sonia Wang? Yes No

How would you rate your coaching experience thus far over the first two trimesters at UCW?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all      Very helpful

Which element of coaching support has been most helpful to our profession?

- Information Observation/Debriefing
- Co-Planning
- Co-Teaching
- Modeling Instruction
- Debriefing Reflection Sessions
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How would you rate the CO-PLANNING support received from your coach?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all      Very helpful

How would you rate the CO-TEACHING support received from your coach?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all      Very helpful

How would you rate the MODELING INSTRUCTION provided by your coach?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all      Very helpful

How would you rate the DEBRIEFING REFLECTION SESSIONS facilitative by your coach?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all      Very helpful

Is there anything that your coach can do to improve your coaching experience?

### Coaching Survey 2

The same questions from Survey 1 were in the second survey with the addition of the following:

In Coaching Survey 1, the Debriefing Reflection Sessions were noted as being helpful to teachers. Please share with me the reasons why this element of coaching has been helpful.

Do you believe you have grown as a teacher so far this year?

- Yes
- No
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If you answer “yes” to the above question, please explain how coaching has supported you in your growth. If you answered “no” to the above question, please explain how your coach could better support you to experience growth as an educator.

In a recent study, surveys showed that certain traits allow for more effective coaching. Please check the traits that you believe are important to be present in an instructional coach. This is what you feel should be present, regardless of whether it is currently present.

- Dedication/Consistency
- Awareness/Insightfulness
- Experience (Classroom and in Field of Education)
- Honest but Kind
- Good Communication Skills
- Professional
- Supportive/Available
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please identify 2-3 traits in your current coach that you feel has contributed to your coaching experience. If you are willing, please expand on your response.

What are ways (generic or specific) that your coach could improve her coaching supports and efforts for you?

**Coaching Survey 3**

The same questions from Survey 1 were in the second survey with the addition of the following:

Do you believe you have grown as a teacher so far this year?

- Yes
- No
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

In what ways have you grown as a teacher this year?

If you answer “yes” to the above question, please explain how coaching has supported you in your growth. If you answered “no” to the above question, please explain how your coach could better support you to experience growth as an educator.

In reflection on this school year, please share your thoughts on the amount of time you spent with your coach.

- Too much time
- Just enough time
- Not enough time

What are ways (generic of specific) that your coach could improve her coaching supports and efforts for you?

What are ways (generic of specific) that your coach could improve her coaching supports and efforts IN GENERAL?