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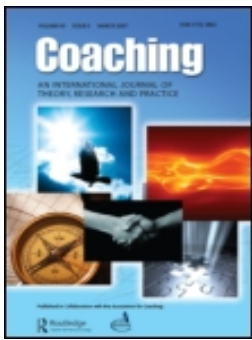
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Jim Knight & Christian van Nieuwerburgh

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## Instructional coaching: a focus on practice

Jim Knight<sup>a\*</sup> and Christian van Nieuwerburgh<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA;* <sup>b</sup>*School of Psychology, University of East London, London, UK*

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This article provides an overview of coaching in educational settings in the UK before introducing the concept of Instructional Coaching which is an evidence-based approach which has been developed and trialled in the USA. Instructional Coaching is defined and discussed in relation to UK-based approaches. It is proposed that Instructional Coaching may be of value within the UK and this article concludes with some ideas about how the approach might be introduced into the education sector.

**Keywords:** coaching; instructional coaching; professional learning; professional development; instruction; education

In the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in how coaching can be implemented in schools around the globe. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003 proposed that coaching ‘could have the power to transform teachers’ professional learning’ (p. 23), and in 2005, a landmark document set out the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education [CUREE], 2005). Described as the ‘cornerstone of teacher professional development’ (Cordingley, 2006, p. 7), coaching is generally viewed as a powerful strategy for improving how learning occurs in schools. Coaching in education has been defined as:

a one-to-one conversation focused on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate. (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 17)

One approach to coaching that is being implemented widely in North America is instructional coaching. During instructional coaching, the goal setting, questioning and data gathering typical of one-to-one coaching are integrated with explanation, modelling and feedback (Knight, 2007).

This article provides (1) a short overview of coaching in the UK, (2) a definition of instructional coaching, (3) an explanation of the partnership theory behind this approach to coaching, (4) an explanation of the components of the instructional

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [jknight@ku.edu](mailto:jknight@ku.edu)

coaching process and (5) a discussion of how instructional coaching might be implemented in the UK.

### **Coaching in the United Kingdom**

Capitalising on growing interest in schools, the landmark National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (CUREE, 2005) encouraged educators to build on existing mentoring practices and develop coaching within their organisations. While categorising both mentoring and coaching as 'learning conversations', the framework identified three terms to cover the spectrum of interventions: (1) mentoring, (2) specialist coaching and (3) collaborative coaching:

- (1) Mentoring was understood as a structured process for supporting others through career transitions.
- (2) Specialist coaching was related to interventions focused on developing educational practice.
- (3) Collaborative coaching was seen as a reciprocal process between peers.

Based on the National Framework, the National College for School Leadership published an influential booklet entitled *Leading Coaching in Schools* (Creasy & Paterson, 2005). Presented in a reader-friendly, accessible format and available to download for free, this document presented schools with a clear framework that placed coaching within an educational context. Billed as a 'workbook', *Leading Coaching in Schools* provided a practical way for school leaders to engage with the increased interest in coaching. With a clear preference for non-directive approaches, Creasy and Paterson identified the five key skills required of effective educational coaches:

- Establishing rapport and trust.
- Listening for meaning.
- Questioning for understanding.
- Prompting action, reflection and learning.
- Developing confidence and celebrating success. (p. 14)

Subsequently, CUREE developed a suite of training materials on effective mentoring and coaching to support school staff to deliver in-house presentations and training. With many of the UK's leading national educational organisations supporting the introduction of coaching into schools, there has been a steady growth of interest and increased coaching activity across the country.

### **Challenges**

While the increased interest in coaching was welcome, a number of challenges persist: definitions of coaching and mentoring are sometimes still ambiguous and overlapping, the perceived tension between coaching and performance management has not been resolved, and there are no evidence-based educational coaching models focused on improving the practice of teaching.

### ***Coaching and mentoring***

There is broad (but incomplete) agreement that coaches ‘do not readily give advice’ and that coaching should help ‘learners to come up with their own answers and generate their own questions’. At the same time, it is accepted that mentors ‘will have had the same role as the mentees at some point in their careers’ and the ‘focus is on passing on knowledge from an experienced member of staff to an inexperienced one’ (Tolhurst, 2006, p. 9). While there is still disagreement about the terminology (e.g. see Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2009), this poses a dilemma in educational settings: to what extent does a coach have to be familiar with a particular teaching and learning practice in order to support a colleague?

### ***Tension between coaching and performance management***

In education, as in occupational settings, the question of whether a leader can be both a coach and a line manager has been either ignored or avoided. According to Lofthouse, Leat and Towler (2010), ‘schools are still grappling with the core tension of the relationship between performance management and coaching’ (p. 17).

Based on one of the principles originally outlined in the National Framework, this tension is unhelpful. The principle of setting up a learning agreement stipulates that a coach should establish ‘confidence about the boundaries of the relationship by agreeing and upholding ground rules that address imbalances in power and accountability’ (Creasy & Paterson, 2005, p. 13). Maintaining a performance management role alongside a coaching role seems to present challenges that are not easily resolved.

### ***Lack of an evidence-based coaching model for education***

Despite the laudable efforts of a wide range of educational organisations in the UK and the creation of a national framework for coaching, there are still no evidence-based models specifically designed for schools. A number of writers (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Robertson, 2008; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012) propose the GROW model (Goals, Reality, Options and Way forward) popularised by Sir John Whitmore (2002) or similar models with different acronyms: LEAP (Looking at goals, Exploring reality, Analysing Possibilities; see Tolhurst, 2006); STRIDE (Strengths, Target, Reality, Ideas/opinions, Decide/commit, Evaluate; see Thomas & Smith, 2009); and STEPPPA (Subject, Target/objective, Emotion, Perception, Plan, Pace, Act/adopt; see McLeod & Thomas, 2010).

In the initial stages of introducing coaching into schools, these models have been of great utility. However, to make continued progress and ensure consistent practice, an evidence-based theoretically sound educational coaching model is needed.

### **A definition of instructional coaching**

One model of educational coaching that is the focus of increased study in North America is instructional coaching, an approach to professional learning that is the product of more than a decade of research conducted at the Kansas Coaching Project, part of the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-

CRL). While research is far from complete, several studies showing promising results have been conducted to develop, validate and refine this approach to improving instruction (Knight & Cornett, 2009; Knight et al., 2010, 2011).

Like mentors, specialist coaches and collaborative coaches, instructional coaches employ effective listening, dialogical questioning and other communication- and relationship-building strategies. What distinguishes this model from other approaches is that instructional coaches *teach* others how to learn very specific, evidence-based teaching practices such as formative assessment (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2009) or cooperative learning (Slavin, 1983). The theoretical framework inherent in this approach and the specific practices that coaches employ are described below.

### **Traditional professional learning in education: expert-novice relationship**

Enormous expense and effort has been dedicated to identifying, codifying and validating the practices of effective teachers (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2001). As a result, professional learning in education is frequently dedicated to teaching teachers how to implement those practices. Unfortunately, when leaders are positioned as experts and teachers are positioned as novices to be trained by those experts, the inherent inequality of the training relationship interferes with the likelihood that the practices will be implemented. Coaching expert Timothy Gallwey (2001) summarises why the traditional expert-novice relationship often fails:

Change is viewed as a movement from bad to good, defined and initiated by someone other than the one who is making the change. It is done in a judgmental context that usually brings with it resistance, doubt, and fear of failure on the part of the student. Neither student nor teacher is likely to be aware that this approach to change undermines the student's innate eagerness and responsibility for learning.  
(p. 6)

Recognising the ineffectiveness of traditional training, some professional developers have adopted an alternative approach to coaching, in which they choose not to share ideas, instead believing that those being coached hold within them the answers to their challenges, and that the goal of coaching, therefore, should be to assist others as they identify opportunities, unleash solutions and focus their efforts. While honouring the professionalism of teachers, this approach is not designed to help teachers learn proven practices. By comparison, instructional coaching does both – it respects the professionalism of teachers but is also designed to ensure that they are able to learn the best practices.

### **Instructional coaching: the partnership approach**

Instructional coaches honour the professionalism of teachers by grounding coaching in the foundational belief that coach and teacher see their relationship as an authentic partnership between equals and not a relationship between an expert and a novice. This partnership is articulated in seven principles (Knight, 2011a, b) that shape everything an instructional coach does. Coaches use the partnership principles to evaluate the effectiveness of previous actions, to make decisions in the

midst of interactions and to plan future interactions. The seven principles are as follows.

### ***Equality***

Partnership involves relationships between equals (Block, 1993; Eisler, 1988; Schein, 2009). Thus, everyone's thoughts and beliefs are held to be valuable, and although each individual is different, no individual decides for another.

### ***Choice***

In a partnership, one individual does not make decisions for another (Block, 1993; Senge, 1990). Because partners are equal, they make their own individual choices and make decisions collaboratively.

### ***Dialogue***

To arrive at mutually acceptable decisions, partners engage in dialogue (Bernstein, 1983; Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). In a partnership, one individual does not impose, dominate or control. Instead, partners engage in conversation, learning together as they explore ideas.

### ***Praxis***

The purpose of partnership is to enable individuals to have more meaningful experiences. In partnership relationships, meaning arises when people reflect on ideas and then put those ideas into practice (Freire, 1980; Gadamer, 1975; Senge, 1990). A requirement for partnership is that each individual is free to reconstruct and use content the way he or she considers it to be most useful.

### ***Voice***

Partnership is multi-vocal rather than uni-vocal, and all individuals in a partnership have many opportunities to express their point of view (Argyris, 1999; Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Vella, 1995). Indeed, a primary benefit of a partnership is that each partner gets to learn from others rather than just repeating what he or she already knows.

### ***Reciprocity***

In a partnership, everyone benefits from the success, learning or experience of everyone else (Freire, 1980; Senge, 1990; Vella, 1995). Therefore, people taking the partnership approach go into conversations expecting to learn.

### **Instructional coaching: the process**

The partnership approach is the theory behind instructional coaching. The partnership principles come alive in the actions of instructional coaching, which are manifested in a coaching process. In keeping with the spontaneity of the partnership approach,

the instructional coaching process is not employed as a blueprint to be followed step by step, but as a framework to be adapted by the coach so as to fit each coaching situation. Instructional coaching usually involves the following components.

### **Goals**

More than two decades ago, Fritz (1989) suggested that two factors are important for personal growth: (1) a clear picture of current reality and (2) a clear goal that motivates an individual to move beyond that current reality. Knowing where we are and knowing where we want to go, Fritz argued, creates a tension that can only be resolved by growth. Peter Senge, in his seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), summarised Fritz's ideas as follows:

The juxtaposition of vision (what we want) and a clear picture of current reality (where we are relative to what we want) generates what we call "creative tension": a force to bring them together, caused by the natural tendency of tension to seek resolution. The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives. (p. 132)

Instructional coaches begin the coaching process by partnering with teachers to set up this creative tension. First, to create a clear picture of current reality, they gather data on what is currently happening in a teacher's classroom. The data could consist of student achievement measures, student opinions gathered through surveys such as those developed by Harvard researcher Ron Ferguson at the Tripod Project, or more frequently, video data gathered in a teacher's classroom using a camera such as a Go Pro, iPhone, iPad or Flip camera.

Instructional coaches share the data they gathered with teachers or share video with teachers for their review. Video has proven to be especially powerful because teachers (like most professionals) are often unaware of what their professional practice looks like until they see video of their lessons – this is consistent with Prochaska's findings about pre-contemplation during change (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994).

After teacher and coach have reviewed the data, together they identify a goal. Teachers who watch their teaching and their students on video are often especially committed to identify a goal. An appropriate goal could be a student goal related to behaviour (fewer than four disruptions per 10 minutes), achievement (95% mastery of informal checks for understanding) or attitudes (90% of students will say they enjoy reading on a quarterly survey). Effective goals are (1) specific, (2) measurable and (3) compelling to the people who set them. As Chip and Dan Heath have written, the best goal 'kicks you in the gut' (2010, p. 76).

People are rarely motivated by other people's goals (Pink, 2009), but when they have a clear understanding of current reality and a personally compelling specific goal to strive for, the professional growth of instructional coaching can begin.

Hargrove (2008) further clarifies why goal setting is so important within instructional coaching by distinguishing between 'push' and 'pull' coaching. Push coaching, Hargrove writes, occurs when coaches start with a series of ideas and then try to convince others to implement them. Learning in push coaching is pushed



along by the coach. Pull coaching, on the other hand, occurs when coaches begin the coaching process by asking others what they would like to do in the future. Instructional coaching, like pull coaching, is pulled along by the goals and desires of the learners.

### ***High-leverage practices***

After the teacher has identified a goal, the coach suggests evidence-based practices the teacher might implement in an effort to meet the goal. These practices are often organised around four areas: (1) content planning, (2) formative assessment, (3) instructional practices and (4) community building.

*Content planning* practices are used by teachers to plan effective courses, units and lessons. Frequently utilised practices in the USA are *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), *Concept-based Curriculum and Instruction* by Lynn Erickson (2007), and Content Enhancement by Lenz and colleagues (Lenz, Bulgren, Schumaker, Deshler, & Boudah, 1994; Lenz, Marrs, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1993; Lenz, Schumaker, Deshler, & Bulgren, 1998).

*Formative assessment practices* are used by teachers to identify precisely what students are to learn, how to assess student understanding and how to provide feedback to students on their progress. Simply put, teachers use formative assessment practices so they can know how well students are progressing and so each student knows how well he or she is progressing (Chapuis, 2009; Popham, 2008; Stiggins et al., 2009).

*Instructional practices* are used by teachers to increase engagement and mastery during lessons. Proven instructional practices include cooperative learning (Slavin, 1983), stories (Denning, 2011), effective questions (Walsh & Sattes, 2005), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and challenging assignments (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998).

*Community building* refers to practices teachers use to create safe and productive learning environments. High-yield instructional practices include creating a learner-friendly culture, building relationships, teaching expectations (Sprick, 2009) and reinforcing expectations with effective, frequent praise and fluent corrections.

During instructional coaching, the teaching practices are only used to help teachers achieve their goals for students – teachers do not implement a practice just for the practice's sake. Thus, while instructional coaches help teachers learn new practices, they do it only in the service of teachers' goals.

### ***Explicit explanations***

To help ensure that teachers implement the new practices they identify with their coaches, coaches need to describe those practices in a way that makes it easiest for teachers to implement them effectively. This is a two-part process.

On the one hand, when coaches explain new teaching practices, their explanations must be clear and easy to act on; otherwise, teachers will not be able to transfer them to the classroom. Thus, coaches must have deep, complete understanding of the practices they describe *and* must be able to explain those practices so that everyone can learn, internalise and use them. Support for the importance of precise explanations is found in Gawande's studies of doctors and

medical teams (2010) for the World Health Organization, which demonstrated that precise explanations embodied in checklists produce a much greater likelihood of widespread, shared understanding of practices compared with teams who do not utilise checklists.

However, just telling teachers how to implement practices is inconsistent with the partnership approach of instructional coaching, so instructional coaches explain practices precisely, but provisionally. In other words, as coaches explain the aspects of a teaching practice, they also explain that those practices may need to be adapted to be best suited to the needs of individual students and teachers. Thus, as they explain each aspect of the practice, they ask teachers whether or not it needs to be adapted in any way to meet the unique strengths or needs of students or their own strengths or needs. In short, instructional coaches adopt Liu's (2004) dictum that 'Teaching is not one-size-fits-all; it's one-size-fits-one' (p. 47).

### ***Modelling***

Explanation introduces practices to teachers, but teachers usually need to see those practices in action to be ready to implement them fluently. For this reason, modelling is an important part of the learning that is at the heart of instructional coaching. Most frequently, this occurs when a coach demonstrates a practice in a teacher's classroom. Instructional coaches do not teach the whole class. They just show how a particular practice could be implemented, and the teacher observes the coach, sometimes taking notes on a checklist or observation sheet that was developed jointly by the coach and teacher.

Modelling can occur in several other ways, and not just in the teacher's classroom in front of his or her students. For example, the coach can demonstrate a practice in the teacher's classroom with only the coach and the teacher present. Alternatively, the coach and teacher could co-teach a lesson. On some occasions, the coach and teacher visit another teacher's classroom. In yet other instances, modelling occurs when the teacher watches a video of the new practice.

### ***Deliberate practice and progress towards the goal***

Hearing about a new practice and seeing it modelled begin the process, but turning ideas into habits takes practice and feedback. Thus, during the process of instructional coaching, teachers practise the new practice and coaches gather data on the impact of the practice. Data might be gathered from looking at video, such as student survey data (such as that gathered from the Tripod survey), or from achievement data from standardised or, more frequently, formative assessment, such as that gathered from a technique such as exit tickets (Syed, 2010).

The purpose of gathering data is to monitor progress towards the goal. Thus, if coach and teacher have identified 90% engagement or 95% correct answers on a summative assessment as a goal, coach and teacher monitor until the goal is met. When the goal is reached, the coach and teacher identify another goal they would like to pursue.

***Implementing instructional coaching in the UK***

Based on the discussion above, it could be argued that instructional coaching would be an appropriate intervention in schools in the UK. School leaders, educators and students are increasingly embracing a wide range of coaching approaches. The limited evidence available indicates that coaching can deliver better results for students and educators. For example, it has been shown that coaching teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement (Ross, 1992; Shidler, 2008). Further, studies suggest that secondary school students benefit from personal coaching (Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh & Passmore, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, Zacharia, Luckham, Prebble & Browne, 2012) and that providing students with coaches can lead to improved examination results (Passmore & Brown, 2009). In addition, teachers' sense of well-being can be enhanced through coaching (Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010). Initial results suggest that coaching can even benefit primary school children (Briggs & van Nieuwerburgh, 2010, 2011, 2012; Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; Suggett, 2012). While the diversity of approaches should be celebrated, there is a need for an evidence-based, educational coaching model to support the professional development of educators.

With the current reduction of funding and decreasing significance of local authorities in England, there is a pressing need for schools (or groups of schools) to identify and implement new models of cost-effective and evidence-based professional development. Most schools recognise that the quality of teachers is still the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). As shown above, there is also a belief and a growing body of evidence that coaching has an important role to play.

Instructional coaching combines what is best about coaching (*the partnership principles*) with what is best about professional development (*collaborative learning*). Instructional coaches bring the focus of conversations between educators back to what is widely acknowledged to be of key importance: *the skills and attributes of being an excellent teacher*. Importantly, instructional coaching is a long-term, ongoing process rather than a short-term intervention. The approach also encourages collaboration between schools (or groups of schools), as instructional coaches can be employed to work in one school, in several schools or across an educational system.

Experiences in the US show that instructional coaching can be used as a way of recognising and rewarding the best teachers. By inviting the most successful practitioners to become instructional coaches, schools and local authorities/districts can celebrate teachers' achievements while also supporting the effective dissemination of best practice in the classroom.

It is unlikely that schools in the UK will adopt an identical approach to the one followed in the USA. First, due to resourcing issues and the way in which schools operate, it may be difficult to employ full-time instructional coaches. Second, schools and the educational system have invested in proven practices which may supplement or replace some of those used in the USA. Finally, there may be 'cultural' differences which need to be taken into account when exploring the use of instructional coaching in the UK.

## Conclusion

At a time when there is growing consensus about the potential of coaching in education, instructional coaching may provide an important new approach to professional development in UK schools. It is already being taught as part of the curriculum on a postgraduate module on 'Coaching and Mentoring in Education' as part of the MSc in Coaching Psychology at the University of East London. The approach has been launched at a series of national conferences in April 2012. Further, several schools are piloting the approach to determine if it is appropriate and effective in the UK context. Time and further study will tell us much more about what instructional coaching can mean for students and educators in the UK.

## Notes on contributors



Jim Knight is a research associate at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. He is also president of the Instructional Group. For more than 10 years Jim has studied instructional coaching. He has written several books: *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction*, *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach to Dramatically Improving Instruction*. He co-wrote with Randy Sprick and others *Coaching Classroom Management: Strategies and Tools for Administrators and Coaches*. In addition Jim has written numerous articles for educational journals including the *Journal of Staff Development*, *Principal Leadership*, *The School Administrator*, *Delta Kappan* and *Teachers Teaching Teachers*. Jim has been the principal investigator for several research projects including and IES funded grant on Teacher Quality and Pathways to Success which was a partnership with the Topeka, Kansas which involved a comprehensive district-wide school reform initiative. Jim has presented and led coaching workshops and consulted in more than 35 states, most of Canada and several foreign countries. He has a PhD in education and has won several teaching and service awards.



Christian van Nieuwerburgh is a highly sought-after executive coach, researcher and educational consultant with significant leadership experience in the public sector. He is passionate about the power and potential of coaching in education – with staff, students and children. He currently divides his time between three roles: Program Leader for the MSc in Coaching and Coaching Psychology at the University of East London, CEO of the International Centre for Coaching in Education and Executive Coach for West Midlands Councils.

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