



What does research tell us about the benefits of an Instructional Coaching approach in ITE?

Coaching in education is often selected as a mechanism for change. Given the amount and rate of change demanded in education it is perhaps unsurprising that many models of coaching in education co-exist; each one offering a supportive practice based on a relationship between coach and coachee facilitated through dialogue. There are differences in the intended purposes of the coaching, the ways that dialogue is framed and the extent to which coaching forms an integrated part of a wider professional experience. Such variations can be explained in part by the roles and responsibilities of both parties, both within and beyond the coaching situation.

‘Coaching in education is a one-to-one conversation that focuses 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)¹

Instructional coaching; myth busting

There is a real buzz around instructional coaching (IC) in English schools and ITE provision at present. IC has origins in the USA with probably the most significant proponent of it being Jim Knight, who leads the Instructional Coaching Group². Jim has been working in this area for two decades.

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

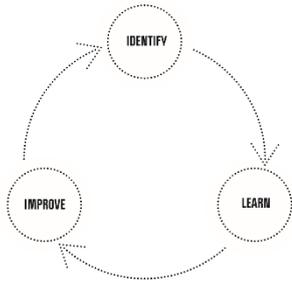
So, let’s dispel some myths by checking in with the language. Firstly, there is a long tradition of ‘instruction’ being used to mean ‘teaching and learning’ in the USA. In the UK we tend to think of instruction as a command, or a direct communication. As other US terminology, such as ‘direct instruction’ and ‘explicit instruction’ is also now commonly used in the UK we need to note that they add the terms ‘direct’ and ‘explicit’. This demonstrates that instruction is about pedagogy as a repertoire. Secondly the IC model typically sits somewhere in between what we could tend to characterise as coaching and mentoring. Instructional coaches in the US are experienced teachers whose practice and training has allowed them to develop specific expertise. This does not mean that they ‘instruct’ but that they bring their expertise to bear within the coaching conversations. This vignette might help.

When our CPD coordinator announced we were going to start instructional coaching to improve teaching reading in Key Stage 1 I was quite worried. Would it add to my workload? Would it mean teaching to a formula? Our instructional coach, Sonia, is employed as Literacy Lead in the MultiAcademy Trust. Instructional coaching is focused on specific teaching techniques, and Sonia seems confident in these and wants me to follow particular guidelines. I have had to drop some of my old practices. On the flipside, I am more confident in how I can use these teaching strategies and I understand a bit more about the evidence for them. All KS1 teachers have been making more use of the same approaches, but Sonia’s advice is always centred on me and my class and our discussions are based on that. It feels like the best bits of the mentoring I remember from my PGCE five years ago. We use the ‘impact cycle’ as a framework and sometimes video evidence of my lessons. The lesson observations and coaching sessions are time-consuming, but

¹ van Nieuwerburgh, C. (Ed) 2012. *Coaching in education: getting better results for students, educators and parents*. London, UK: Karmac

² <https://instructionalcoaching.com/>

I think it is making me more effective in this bit of my planning and teaching.



It is also worth noting that IC done well has a strong social justice philosophy. It is about understanding how learning outcomes can be levered in ways that are not limited to improving test scores or

grading teaching. It is significant that the greatest use of IC in the US has been in the teaching of reading, and this goes way beyond phonics or other single pedagogies to creating environments which invite reading and use reading as a key component of inclusion.

Each type of coaching in education is characterised by its own curriculum and pedagogy. The curriculum is the scope and detail of the content of the conversations and its links with the teaching and learning context. In some examples this curriculum is framed as part of pre-determined focus, while in others it emerges from discussions between the coach and teacher. The specific coaching pedagogy includes the roles taken by the participants, the nature of the questions being asked, and the way that tools (such as video and pedagogic guidelines) are deployed to support reflection and planning. The coach's and coachee's level of engagement and their personal epistemologies, their understanding of and approach to the professional and conceptual knowledge to be explored, will also influence the potential for coaching as workplace learning. IC is no different. The model developed by the Warwick team will provide the means by which to make IC work well over time.

Novice learning and seeking parity (the two chairs)

An important part of any coaching practice is the partnership which is created and hopefully sustained. This is between a teacher with some experience (mentor) and a novice (trainee or student teacher) and is situated in the mentors' school context. There are two key aspects of this relationship that are significant. We need to reflect on the power dynamics that can be at play in the scenario (deliberate, implied and hidden) and we need to know something about how adults learn

as novices in complex practice environments. In ITE there is an inherent hierarchy built into mentoring, but this does not mean that is not possible for both partners to gain a sense of parity (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2017)³. IC can be a positive place to build this based on

Shared labour for a common purpose

- Combined effort for a common purpose with a focus on students / pupils and their learning

Parity and link to productive dialogue

- Working productively as well as building relationships

A safe forum for professional challenge

- Making choices about practice beyond quality assurance and performance management type processes

Mark Dowley (a CollectivED Fellow based in Australia) recently wrote a blog⁴ in which he drew on research to explain that professional learning for teachers was typically grouped as focusing on one of three categories; teaching behaviours, content knowledge or strategic thinking, with evidence suggesting that the third category has the greatest positive impact on teacher effectiveness. As Mark writes '*It's not just what the teacher does, it's understanding what the teacher perceives that allows them to make the decision about what to do next.*' It is thus essential that IC includes this aspect.

Support and substance (the cushion, the radiator and the floor)

One of the traditions of mentoring in ITE is that of passing judgement, being the gatekeeper of the student teachers' transition towards qualified status. While this is part of the contract with the provider it is essential that it does not become the dominant stance. Few people (especially novices) thrive if they perceive that they will be judged in their every move. Having researched coaching over a decade it is clear that issues which support and disrupt it affect its perceived and actual success, and the cautionary tales are useful in diagnosing the potential pitfalls. Mentoring can be distorted away from the personal learning needs of the

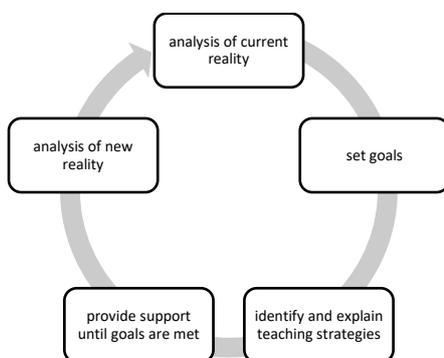
³ <https://eprint.ncl.ac.uk/211126>

⁴ <https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2020/06/coaching-is-more-than-strategies-it-is-also-about-perception/>

student teacher (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2014)⁵. The outcome can be that mentoring conversations are sometimes didactic or instructional, driven by target setting and checking, and do not always engage the mentee in proactive participation in professional dialogue. So, if IC is to be successful a supportive stance is crucial. At least some of this is achieved through the relationships that mentors and student teachers develop over time. As already stated, we need to be aware of power dynamics. We can work to ensure that each conversation and related activity in IC supports the development of a trusting relationship, with both the student teacher and mentor trusting each other to show up, to put the work in, and to pay attention to each other's contributions. This is what the Warwick IC model refers to as the 'holding environment'.

Being supportive does not mean reducing challenge. One way to create challenge in IC is by ensuring that the conversations are grounded in the lived experiences of the student teacher as they learn to teach, so that they are authentic and relate specifically to their own emerging practice. Scrutiny of practice, feedback, and target setting is thus shared, personalised and has recognisable validity. It is also essential to base the discussion on a sound knowledge base, both of effective mentoring and coaching techniques and of the pedagogic repertoire being developed. This is one of the reasons that in the original IC models the coaches have specific expertise (such as in teaching early reading) and enhancing and developing that expertise is part of their ongoing CPD. This solidity allows the conversation to have depth and to create opportunities for breadth.

Getting the practice right (the light and the cutlery)



In order to achieve the supported shared scrutiny needed to sustain the IC model it is necessary to use the process to shed light on practice and focus on detail. Without this the student teacher cannot gain the clarity from which they co-create meaningful and realistic goals and targets.

The ability to do this is significantly enhanced if the right tools are used. The tools used by the coaches help to facilitate coaching as a developmental process. These include the use of video, the development of coaching guides for specific pedagogies, well-designed observation structures, a language to describe dimensions of coaching, an opportunity to recognise these and a framework and means by which coaching quality can be developed over time. The Warwick IC team will be developing tools suited to the context. While IC adopts successful professional learning routines it is important that it does not just become another busy set of procedures which you are asked to engage your student teacher in. This is where using the tools and principles with integrity and intelligence are vital.

Making it count (the mirror, the clock, the fruit and the flower)

To have impact IC needs to create a space which supports reflection, both during the conversation and following it. This description (taken from a recent blogpost, Lofthouse, 2020)⁶ may seem beyond the remit of IC, but it is what IC can support in terms of developing attributes and behaviours needed by new teachers. *Reflection is a metacognitive process in which we review our actions and our decisions (either immediately or later), prompting ourselves to think through what happened and why. Reflection can be done individually or with others, it might have a written outcome, or simply lead to some deeper thinking or conversations about practice. Reflection takes us beyond the immediate and specific, for example prompting us to consider background factors or implications at a range of scales and time-frames. Reflection also gives us a chance to connect with our values and beliefs, the 'why' is not purely a procedural question, it is often an ethical one. This takes us to the level of critical reflection which as (Habermas, 1973)*

⁵https://eprint.ncl.ac.uk/pub_details2.aspx?pub_id=%20207274

⁶ <https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2020/03/time-to-reflect/>

suggests involves us thinking more deeply about ethical and moral criteria and the wider historical or socio-political perspectives and contexts which frame our work as educators.

In our current anxiety about teacher workload it can be tempting to see time as a negative component of coaching; the time taken to get trained and fit it in which cannot be spent on anything else. IC corrals resources and time and making the most of this is dependent on the integrity of the agreed 'rules' and how these are exercised by the mentor and student teacher, creating an appropriate division of labour. It is also possible to see the time taken for IC as a gift, giving time to prioritise the issues that need resolving as the student teacher learns and develops. IC sessions should be timely, in tune with what the realities of student teacher's practice as indicated by the IC model. While ITE is time-limited in coaching terms time can also be considered as something which stretches out into the future, and sometimes the greatest benefit from coaching will be how it helps to shape and sustain professional formation which is the foundation for ongoing development.

Finally, there is evidence that many teachers at all career stages appreciate the opportunity to be coached; it allows them to feel listened to, part of a significant professional relationship and to have their own needs and interests addressed. While IC may seem like a new strategy to meet the demands of learning to teach it can also be one which offers a space to nourish ideas and be part of a well-balanced diet of professional learning experiences and expectations. There is a wellbeing aspect to all forms of coaching done well. Teaching will remain a complex practice and it is rare for teachers to feel that they have gained complete mastery, and even with experience their expertise is always contingent. The constant is that teachers' learning matters and IC can be a significant activity in support of this.

'When teachers' learning is based on their genuine assessment and understanding of pupils' learning they can start to make adaptations to their practice which can lead to real differences in outcomes. Coaching can provide a means by which these and other key principles

can be achieved and thus teacher learning can be enhanced' (Lofthouse, R., et al., 2010, pp. 9)⁷

More about CollectivED

CollectivED⁸ is a research and practice centre based at Leeds Beckett University. Our values and purposes are:

- Encouraging and enabling collaborative conversations which create powerful professional learning
- Building capacity in the work of educators and leaders to create contexts which support inclusive career-long and profession-wide learning
- Working to break down barriers to professional development through positive engagement with the education sector and allied practitioners
- Increasing the opportunities for educational change through enhanced professional agency and wellbeing

If you would like to read more about coaching and mentoring a good place to start are the CollectivED working papers⁹ (which include two special mentoring issues) or blog¹⁰.

You are very welcome to join our mailing list. Please email CollectivED@leedsbeckett.ac.uk to be added.

⁷<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/cflat/files/coaching-for-teaching.pdf>

⁸<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/carnegie-school-of-education/research/collectived/>

⁹<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/carnegie-school-of-education/research/working-paper-series/collectived/>

¹⁰<https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/categories/collectived/>