

# RECIPROCAL TEAM COACHING

Cross-school visitations become valuable learning tools when the process is made more interactive, involving teams of colleagues who "coach" each other through reciprocal inquiry and feedback.

If you've decided to read this article, you're probably interested in such topics as peer coaching, inquiry, inter-school collaboration, networking and school change. If you're already into networking, you've probably either visited another school or hosted such a visitation. Cross-school visitations usually include an orientation session, some class observations, conversations among visitors and hosts, and a whole lot of "show and tell."

Visitations have generally been reported as being enjoyable, informative and helpful, but they are seldom repeated, and there's a growing feeling that something more is needed to get the most out of cross-school interaction. This arti-

cle will describe some strategies for deepening and enriching the inquiry.

As the name implies, reciprocal team coaching describes an interactive process, one in which two or more teams of educational colleagues coach each other. Unlike some other forms of coaching, the relationships entailed in this approach to observing performance and providing constructive criticism are truly reciprocal — systematic exchanges between co-equal partners that are designed to result in powerful learning for all participants.

The basic logistics in reciprocal team coaching are quite simple. A team of teachers (often with an administrator as team member)

from one school spends a day observing in another school (typically a self-selected partner from some network of schools), with its observation focused in part by requests for feedback from the host school team (Example: "We're interested in the extent to which our students display higher order thinking in the questions they ask in class. What did you observe that might provide evidence in this area?").

At the end of the day, the host and visiting teams engage in dialogue as "critical friends" — sharing impressions and reflections, citing specific incidents and interactions, asking and responding to critical

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The schedule of classroom visits and interviews with students, staff members and parents is carefully designed to give a balanced array of impressions of the program, with particular attention to the two critical issues. Time is built in toward the end of the visitation/observation/interview schedule for each visiting team to meet briefly to get ready for the feedback session (to compare notes informally, not to prepare a formal report).

The feedback/dialogue session at the end of the visitations starts with a reiteration of the two critical issues and clarifying questions. One person from each visiting team presents some feedback, specifically relating it to the identified critical issues; other members of the critical friends teams add their comments and the dialogue opens up. At this point, comments by host team members mainly take the form of clarifying questions about the meaning of feedback that visitors have shared.

Using a fishbowl format, host team members spend the next 15 minutes discussing the significance of the feedback as it relates to their critical issues, their action research project and their instructional program in general, and the "feedback spiral" continues to ascend.

The final element is an open discussion among all participants about the process as well as the substance of the observations and the feedback, including preparations for the next reciprocal team coaching visit.

### Other versions of reciprocal team coaching

In the spirit of constructivism, I encourage schools leaders (both administrators and their teacher colleagues) to consider adding this version of reciprocal team coaching to their repertoire of inquiry strategies, and to change and refine the format and structure to fit their own needs.

For example, the reciprocal team coaching could involve just two school teams instead of three. The visitation could be compressed to fit into one day, beginning early in the morning. The format could be revised to focus on a single issue (a holistic student outcome, for example) or several issues, with team members dividing the tasks. The teams could come from the same district or separate districts in the same network (SB 1274; High School Second To None Network), or the teams could be from different departments or levels of the same school.

Other possible variations in strategies for using reciprocal team coaching to extend and enrich collaborative inquiry are numerous. Some are alluded to in the Dewey High School scenario: incorporating a Protocol process, linking focused visits to collaborative action research or teacher researcher initiatives, or designing reciprocal team coaching as a component of a more comprehensive "Cycle of Inquiry" plan (Shawn, 1994).

As these and other ideas are tested, I strongly encourage innovators to share their experiences with me, with each other, and with the broader audience of school change agents.

### References

- Costa, A. & Garmston, R. (1994). *Cognitive Coaching: A foundation for renaissance schools*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Shawn, J. (1994). *Cycles of inquiry*. San Mateo, CA: California Center for School Restructuring. Unpublished paper.

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and probing questions, analyzing and interpreting, pushing thinking to deeper levels, integrating the feedback received into an on-going planning process. The visit is followed-up by another visit to the partner school, during which the reciprocal roles of host-team and critical-friend observers will be reversed.

### **Simple to sophisticated strategies**

Members of the Coalition of Essential Schools will recognize this description of critical-friend visitations, which are part of the year-long TREK program. TREK starts with an intensive team development program that is designed to build trust and rapport and to refine the inquiry and communication skills needed by critical friends. The formal TREK visits frequently begin with an evening session at which orientation occurs, including the identification of essential questions with which the host school is struggling.

The more generic reciprocal team coaching term I am introducing includes the coalition's TREK visits as well as a broad array of other forms of cross-school collegial team interactions — some of them simple and some that are quite sophisticated, cutting-edge strategies that are just emerging from the school restructuring movement, especially among California's SB 1274 network.

### **Ties with the collaboration movement**

The roots for reciprocal team coaching are complex and go deep into constructivism and democracy itself. Perhaps the strongest ties are with the collaboration movement, and most particularly with a form of peer observation and feedback called cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

In a very real sense, reciprocal team coaching is simply an application in the realm of small-group (team) interaction of the same processes and goals that underlie cognitive coaching — building trust, engaging in mutual or reciprocal learning, and moving toward a self-monitoring form of autonomy.

The learning comes primarily through reciprocal inquiry and feedback, a process that is commonly called a feedback loop but which Costa prefers to depict as a spiral. Paradoxically, the movement toward autonomy takes place in a social-interactive context, for which Costa has coined another useful term: "holonomy."

Let's now look more closely at what a reciprocal team coaching visit would actually look like. For this scenario, I've created a hypothetical school — a high school that has limited resources but diverse staff members with imagination, creativity and a commitment to expand their repertoire of change/restructuring/collaborative inquiry strategies. In honor of the roots of this strategy, we'll call it the John Dewey High School.

### **Dewey High collaborates**

Last year, the staff and School Site Council voted to combine and focus their SB 1882 and general fund staff development money on two major targets: to send two teams to Subject Matter Project summer institutes (literature and history) and to train a newly formed restructuring coordinating team in the California School Leadership Academy's full-year School Leadership Team Development program. A small grant was also secured to enroll two teacher representatives in the SB 1882-sponsored teacher researcher program.

Dewey High School's newly trained coordinating team decided to build on the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous year to plan staff and program development for the current year. A collaborative action research project was designed, with teacher researchers and Subject Matter Project participants playing key roles, and with support provided by SB 1882 and Subject Matter Project consultants.

Leadership teams from two other schools that were in the same School Leadership Team cohort have made similar plans, and the three enter into a collaborative agreement to conduct reciprocal team coaching visits among the three schools. One of the other schools is a SB 1274

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school, and its leadership team hosts an orientation and training session to acquaint the others with the Protocol dialogue process that has been developed in that network. Together, they adapt the process to fit their needs, resources and the constraints of a reciprocal team coaching visit.

### **Dewey High hosts visiting teams**

It is now Dewey's turn to host. Here is its plan:

The visiting teams arrive the night before the visitation day and are hosted in volunteer staff members' homes. In that evening's orientation session, two critical issues about which Dewey teachers want feedback are identified, one of those issues having to do with student attitudes toward a new interdisciplinary literature/history course, an innovation that grew out of the summer Subject Matter Project institutes and the focus for Dewey's collaborative action research project.

One of the teacher researchers is freed up by employing a substitute. The researcher's dual roles are to coordinate the visitations and to monitor the process and collect ethnographic data, as planned in the research design. Coordination tasks are shared with a team of volunteer parents and students.