

When Coaching Teachers Has Curiosity As Its Primary Goal

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How can school leaders push for innovation when every year 15 to 20 percent of the teaching staff turns over, along with a similar number of students? High turnover rates make it difficult to hold on to institutional knowledge, and even worse, the rationale for systems can become murky. Schools end up continuing practices they've always used out of inertia; the person who implemented an idea, and who can defend its importance, may have even left. These conditions make for a difficult environment in which to lead change.

The [British International School in Shanghai](#) is by [many measures a successful school](#). The 1,500 students represent 45 nationalities in preschool through a high school International Baccalaureate program and are often the children of expatriates or wealthy Chinese families. But because it is an international school it has significant turnover. [Principal Neil Hopkin](#) needed to find a way to continue pushing his teachers to improve within an environment that wasn't naturally oriented towards change.

'When we tried to boil down what we were looking for — it was helping our colleagues rediscover their curiosity.' [Dr. Neil Hopkin, Principal of British International School in Shanghai](#)

Hopkin and other school leaders wanted to get outside the realm of their own experience; if they relied too heavily on what they "knew," nothing would change. Hopkin was looking for something that would bring a spirit of innovation into the teaching culture. He was looking for ways to push beyond the known. When a vice-president at a pharmaceutical company reached out to Hopkin offering to connect as a coach as part of his company's local outreach Hopkin leapt at the chance. And through the process he was struck by how effective the coaching felt, and how applicable it was to a teaching context. The experience helped him settle on working to improve teaching practice at the school through a coaching model.

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“Our innovation was that we wanted to make teaching and learning better, but we wanted to be better at making teaching and learning better,” Hopkin said during a presentation on the coaching model his school uses at the [Building Learning Communities](#) conference in Boston. That statement is both completely mundane, and the essential struggle of schools everywhere. Every school leader wants a sustainable, effective way to help teachers improve, but finding that process is much more difficult than it sounds because each teacher is an individual, with specific strengths and weaknesses. And every teacher reacts to change differently.

The coaching model they devised is devoid of judgement. Coaches — those with an interest in coaching and a senior or middle leadership role — try to position themselves as thought partners for the teacher, starting before the lesson even happens. The coach and teacher set a goal, devise a plan together, execute the plan, and while it’s happening the coach tries to give in-the-moment observations.

“The key to this isn’t just the sense of community that coaches have, it’s the moment of intervention during practice,” said [Victoria Solway](#), director of teaching and learning at the school. That’s what makes this type of coaching different from the standard lesson observation leaders used to do. In a typical observation, the teacher doesn’t get any feedback until after the lesson is over, and then it usually feels evaluative. At the British International School of Shanghai, Hopkin and Solway are trying to create an experience among the staff that helps teachers notice their own teaching moves as they happen in the classroom.

“We’re trying to get to a space where someone coming into your space isn’t the expert,” Hopkin said. “You as the teacher are still the expert with responsibility and control for your professional experience.” They didn’t want to follow a checklist of teaching practices or try to emulate the teaching approach of one star teacher. Instead, their goal was to help each teacher become a star in their own unique way.

“When we tried to boil down what we were looking for — it was helping our colleagues rediscover their curiosity,” Hopkin said. He wanted teachers asking themselves questions like: Why does my lesson go this way? Why don’t I like this kind of student? Why did this go so well? “We wanted them to see the world with awe and wonder,” he said.

Ironically, this focus on curiosity, learning mindsets, hands-on experiences, and reflection are exactly what teachers at this school offer to students. But they weren’t as comfortable engaging in the same process around their own professional learning. Hopkin hopes the coaching model he’s developing — one based around partnership and shared responsibility between coach and teacher for the fate of the lesson — will help teachers shift their mindsets about change.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE

Hopkin and Solway quickly found that they needed to be flexible with their colleagues, many of whom were uncomfortable with this new approach to teacher professional development. The two leaders wanted coaching sessions to be positive and supportive, personalized and teacher-centered, challenging and reflective, non-evaluative and retrievable. But they also knew many teachers had not experienced that type of coaching before and were wary of anything that seemed like an evaluation.

“What they’re getting is something that’s right for them not only in terms of what they should be working on, but also in how they like to learn and how they like to feel,” Hopkin said. He wants the experience to support teachers as they become even more independent and autonomous in their practice. To do that, he needed them to feel completely safe, so he made it very clear to the staff that nothing from coaching sessions would ever come up in annual reviews.

“No one will take a risk if they feel like they will be kicked in the teeth for landing on their face when trying something new,” Hopkin said.

All coaching sessions start with a pre-lesson meeting when the coach and teacher talk about goals for the lesson and try to anticipate questions or obstacles that might arise. Together they practice how the teacher might address those scenarios. The coach videotapes the lesson with a camera mounted on a Swivel to track the teacher as he or she moves about the classroom. Depending on the teacher's comfort with in-class coaching, the coach may also be in the room quietly offering observations or questions at the point of practice. For teachers who hate that idea, Hopkin and Solway offer asynchronous coaching based on the video footage. No matter which style of coaching happens, the coach and teacher meet again to reflect on what happened during the lesson.

When Solway coaches, she likes to flag moments in the video with voiceover, pointing out strong moments or areas where she noticed something. Sometimes she'll offer resources to the teacher to help further their thinking on the goal they've identified. Solway says it's important that if the lesson goes poorly the coach shares the blame, but if the lesson goes wonderfully, it's best to give the teacher all the credit.

The pre-lesson materials, video and reflection make the experience a retrievable one. Teachers can revisit the video or the notes on their own time. Hopkin admitted it took teachers time to get used to this coaching model and many were skeptical at first. Teachers were also at very different points in their professional learning. Some were already experimental, pushing beyond what felt comfortable regularly and wondering "what if" as a matter of practice. Others, needed more coaching on the nuts and bolts, with the coach continually referring back to a schoolwide "Teaching and Learning Principles" document.

In those cases, Hopkin said "it's an interplay between are we working on the basics or are we working on something more bespoke to you?" But because the coach is working to help teachers notice and correct course autonomously, he or she is often only asking questions and leaving space for the teacher to develop her own thought or next action.

"It's painfully slow because you're just going to ask questions that you want the teacher to ask themselves," Hopkin said. This type of professional learning is akin to what many schools want teachers to provide students. Leaders at British International School of Shanghai learned that using the same teaching pedagogy with professional learners can be an effective way to shift instruction.

After one year of coaching in this way, Hopkin surveyed staff to see if they could substantiate how the coaching had improved their teaching. Teachers reported a 30 percent increase in their confidence, and they felt they were saving 40 percent of their time because they had to do less re-teaching. School leaders also looked at an array of measures like student grades and test scores, student interaction rates, questioning skill surveys, student attention rates, collaborative learning conversations, etc. to try and determine if the quality of learning had increased. Using information from teachers, students, and leaders they compiled those results and determined that the quality of learning increased by 70 percent.

A WHOLE SCHOOL INNOVATION EFFECT

In the process of helping individual teachers embrace small innovations to their teaching, the school as a whole has become more able to embrace change. Before the coaching program began, the International School of Shanghai already had positive things happening, and Hopkin wanted to retain those experiences. But he also wanted to inspire innovation and he's aware that "efficiency suffocates new thinking. The better you are at something the less likely you are to be open to something different."

So he framed the coaching sessions as little experiments, each in service of the broader school strategy. A teacher would make a hypothesis, experiment with it in the classroom, reflect on the insights garnered and how it connected to the larger community goals. The results of those experiments then became data points for broader decisions school leaders were considering.

"We wanted to have a pioneering spirit from people who are well seated in the more traditional paradigm," Solway said. They tried to allow teachers to move up and back along the innovation spectrum, with each person offering

important insights to the learning community. They did not only celebrate the pioneering teachers, but also the pioneering spirit of very traditional ones.

“TeachMeets” are one way school leaders celebrate individual learning as a community. Any person who wants to share what they are working on and how it’s going can do so. The rest of the “audience” — other colleagues — move around to different speakers depending on what interests them. Multiple mini-presentations are going on at once, with the audience moving between them fluidly. This practice helped spread insights beyond grade-level or subject-specific teams. It creates a positive buzz in a staff meeting and individuals can follow up with questions afterwards.

“We’re looking for people to make that international statement of learning: aahh,” Hopkin said. If coaching can help stimulate curiosity in teachers to continue improving and trying new things, then it has done its job in his mind.

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