

Spotlight on Instructional Coaching Relationships: What I Learned by Studying the Language of My Coaching Conversations

In my work with the Institute for Public School Initiatives over the past six years, I have been fortunate to work with many teachers throughout the state of Texas. One of the best parts of my job is the opportunity to provide coaching support for teachers who want to continue honing their craft.

Just as the teachers I work with want to grow as educators, I also have a desire to continually grow in my coaching abilities. So, when it came time for me to write my dissertation, I decided to study my own coaching relationship with teachers, in the hopes that I could apply what I learned in future coaching situations.

Researchers Coburn and Woulfin (2012) posed the question, What factors influence the power dynamics between coaches, administrators, teachers, students, and other stakeholders in the school? I believed that my study could start to answer this question, as it relates to the power dynamics between a coach and teacher. Rather than study many coaching relationships, I chose to focus deeply on one, to uncover all the nuances of the relationship that I could. A high school Spanish teacher in a rural community, whom I'll call Mrs. Smith [a pseudonym], volunteered to participate in the study with me, because she had recently attended a workshop on a new instructional method – the use of storytelling instead of sheltered grammar instruction to teach language – and she wanted support as she implemented this new technique. It was an arrangement that seemed mutually beneficial.

My data sources were our coaching conversations, as well as my own reflective notes. I used critical discourse analysis – the study of language-in-use – to analyze the data (Gee, 2011). After each of our eight coaching conversations, I used Gee's discourse analysis questions to uncover the power dynamics represented through the language we used, either intentionally or not.

For example, one of Gee's questions is, "What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?" Many parts of our conversations gave information about our relationship. For instance, in our second coaching conversation, Mrs. Smith told me, "sometimes they use the word 'lentes' and sometimes they use the word 'gafas.' They're just sort of interchangeable." Here, our relationship is one of teacher/student, as well as proficient in Spanish/not proficient, expert in the discipline/non-expert, and even insider/outsider. However, immediately following this exchange, our relationship slipped into one of teacher/coach, as I said, "Okay. And that made me wonder, is it worth asking students as they're copying, 'What do you notice, what do you wonder?'" and Mrs. Smith responded, "That's a good point."

In all, I found 342 places where our conversations reflected answers to one or more of Gee's questions for discourse analysis. The greatest number (141) related to Gee's question about relationships. These relationships fluctuated widely, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Power relationships present between coach and teacher

Spotlight on Instructional Coaching Relationships: What I Learned by Studying the Language of My Coaching Conversations

Relationship evidenced in the conversation	Coaching conversation(s) in which relationship was evidenced
Coach as leader/Teacher as follower	2
Coach as outsider/Teacher as insider	1, 3, 5
Coach and teacher as co-collaborators	2, 3
Coach and teacher as co-learners	2
Coach and teacher as peers	2, 3
Coach as questioner/Teacher as professional	3, 4, 5, 6
Coach as non-speaker of Spanish/Teacher as expert in Spanish	2, 5
Coach as urban-dweller/Teacher as rural dweller	5
Novice coach/Teacher	8
Coach/Uncertain, willing-to-learn teacher	7, 8
PhD student/Teacher	1, 8

This data indicates that the coaching relationship was multifaceted, and continuously changing, even within individual coaching conversations. I visualized the power dynamics of each role as ranging along a spectrum, as illustrated below in Figure 1.



Coach as leader, teacher as follower (2)	Coach with uncertain, willing-to-learn teacher (7, 8)	Coach and teacher as peers (2, 3) Coach and teacher as	Coach as questioner/Teacher as professional (3, 4, 5, 6)	Novice coach with teacher (8)	Non-speaker of Spanish with expert
--	---	---	--	-------------------------------	------------------------------------

Spotlight on Instructional Coaching Relationships: What I Learned by Studying the Language of My Coaching Conversations

PhD student with teacher (1, 8)	co-collaborators (2, 3) Coach and teacher as co-learners (2) Coach as urban-dweller/ Teacher as rural-dweller (5)	Coach as outsider/ Teacher as insider (1, 3, 5)	in Spanish (2, 5)
---------------------------------	--	--	-------------------

Figure 1: Power dynamics continuum

In many occasions, as illustrated in Figure 1, I had more power in the coaching relationship, as I led the direction of the conversation, as I discussed my study, and as Mrs. Smith followed the direction of the conversation that I proposed and expressed herself as uncertain and willing to learn. However, in many instances, Mrs. Smith held more of the power in the relationship, as she guided me in my understanding of Spanish, as I expressed my lack of expertise in coaching, as she directed the content and structure of our conversations and I asked questions rather than providing statements, and as we both established her as the “insider” in the community and in her discipline, and me as the “outsider” in the community and an outsider to her discipline. Much of the time, though, we shared power in an equitable manner, when we acted as co-collaborators, co-learners, and peers.

Literacy coaches in the field undoubtedly possess an awareness of the complex, multidimensional nature of their roles and relationships with stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and students. This study has implications for how literacy coaches can better understand the dynamics of these relationships and how they can influence the power dynamics in their relationships through a greater awareness of the language used in their coaching conversations. Further, this study indicates that through this greater awareness of the relationship between the language used and the corresponding shifts in power dynamics, coaches can actively strive to shift these power dynamics and transform their relationships.

From this study, I learned the importance of my language in establishing positive, collaborative coaching relationships with teachers. I want to watch my language more closely in future interactions with teachers and ensure that my role is clearly that of a colleague and collaborator. I want to be a sounding board and co-collaborator, not an outside consultant or evaluator. I hope that as I continue to grow as a coach, through experience and continual self-reflection, I can be more helpful and useful to the teachers I have the privilege to work alongside.

Spotlight on Instructional Coaching Relationships: What I Learned by Studying the Language of My Coaching Conversations

References

Coburn, C. E., & Woulfin, S. L. (2012). Reading coaches and the relationship between policy and practice. *Reading Research Quarterly, 47*, 5-30. Retrieved November 11, 2016, from ERIC.

Gee, J. P. (2011b). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. New York, NY: Routledge.

About the Author

Julie Schmal, PhD [insert the bio I wrote at Lakeway meeting]