

Excerpt from *Literacy Coaching: Developing Effective Teachers through Instructional Dialogue* by Marilyn Duncan. Copyright 2006 by Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

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CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE

Instructional dialogue is a structured conversation about teaching and learning with a goal of providing feedback to the teacher. The measure of improvement is always student learning. An instructional dialogue is neither an interrogation nor a therapy session. It is a dialogue between colleagues learning from each other to do their jobs better. Instructional dialogue is an opportunity for teachers through the mentorship and facilitation of a coach to think about their practice and ways to improve it.

Instructional dialogue is also a process of professional development. The teacher, with the support of the coach, identifies a challenge to instruction through the vehicle of an action plan. This plan is the teacher's commitment to action. Together the teacher and coach determine how they will work together and gain information to provide quality feedback to the teacher. After the coach works alongside the teacher, they meet for a dialogue. The teacher commits to a change in classroom practice as a result of the dialogue. The impact of this change is expected to be evident through increased student achievement. Student achievement increases are measured by district, school, and classroom summative and formative assessments.

The process includes:

- A teacher's action plan setting out a current challenge with instruction
- The coach working with the teacher—this enables the coach to see the teacher in action and provide feedback
- An instructional dialogue that follows their work together

- A commitment to change by the teacher and a clear understanding about how this change in instruction will impact student learning
- A plan to follow up on the commitment to confirm successes or clarify confusions.

Remember Jesse's action plan in the previous chapter of this book? It uncovered the challenge he was having with his struggling readers. Because of the nature of his challenge, I was able to see Jesse in action as he was instructing these students in a small group. Where you see the teacher in action is dependent upon where his or her challenge lies. It could be learning how to use a new assessment tool, planning for instruction, or interacting with the whole group, small groups, or individuals. In Jesse's classroom, I was collecting information about his questions and the responses of his students in order to give him feedback that would help solve his challenge.

When I talk about feedback, I mean the opportunity for the teacher to reflect on his or her own practices with support from a colleague with more expertise—the coach. The instructional dialogue—the structured conversation—is where the reflection occurs. It results in a commitment to change by the teacher and some concrete strategies on how to implement that change. One of those strategies will be the collection of data that will show the impact of that change on student learning. The commitment to change will lead into the teacher's next action plan, providing opportunity for the teacher to confirm successes or clarify confusions in a timely manner.

Developing a Relationship between the Teacher and the Coach

“The foundation of a trusting relationship is believing that the other person has integrity. This is demonstrated by meeting commitments and keeping promises” (Kouzes and Posner 2002). Working together in instructional dialogue brings a new dimension to the professional relationships between teachers and a coach. Expectations change. There is a shift from simply being congenial to becoming collegial. Congenial conversations tend to be more about the surface-level practice of the job; collegial conversations are about sharing common professional values and interests. As conversations become more collegial, colleagues learn from one another to do their jobs better.

Successful coaches develop relationships with the people they support based on mutual respect and trust. Coaches operate at the height of professionalism. They are honest with the teachers they support. They talk **to** their colleagues, not about their colleagues. Teachers learn more from coaches who are trustworthy. It is beneficial, prior to beginning a coaching initiative, to articulate and clarify the roles and responsibilities of both the coach and the teacher. If teachers and coaches are clear about what can be expected of them and the commitments they make to each other, the relationship is off to a positive start.

Instructional dialogue operates on the belief that all teachers have strengths upon which they can build. By starting with what the teacher can do, the coach starts with the familiar. Respect comes when the teacher receives help solving their instructional challenges with the coach's expertise.

The work of the coach alongside the teacher is not part of the teacher evaluation system. Discussions and decisions during coaching are based on a continuum of growth for every teacher, so they are not about what the teacher is doing correctly or incorrectly. Information that is shared with the building administrator is about the teacher's progress along this continuum of growth. The teacher always knows what is being shared with the principal. The coach is not part of traditional teacher evaluation procedures.

Roles and Responsibilities for Instructional Dialogue

Teachers feel more confident about the coach's work when the structures leading to successful instructional dialogue are clear. Clarifying roles and responsibilities will allow the teacher's basic questions to be answered. What is the purpose of an action plan? What will the coach do with it? What will the coach do when we work together? What is instructional dialogue? What am I supposed to do and what will the coach do during the dialogue? How do I know this will be a productive use of time for me?

The Action Plan

The action plan is a tool for reflection for the teacher (Figure 2.1). The first question—What is your current challenge in literacy instruction?—encourages teachers to identify their current

ACTION PLAN	
Name	Date
What is your current challenge in literacy instruction?	
What is/are your question/questions?	
What do you know about that area, and what are you trying?	
What support do you need?	
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Figure 2.1: An action plan

instructional challenges. The next question—What is/are your question/questions?—asks teachers to narrow the challenge to the most pressing questions. The third question—What do you know about that area, and what are you trying?—allows the teacher to identify what they know and what they have tried to do to overcome the challenge. The final question—What support do you need?—asks the teacher to identify the kind of support they would like from the coach.

The action plan is also a tool to focus the support provided by the coach. It allows the coach to see where the teacher needs feedback. It provides the coach with a window into what the teacher already knows and has tried. It becomes a planning tool for their job-embedded work.

The teacher's role in using the action plan is to:

- Determine the current instructional challenge based upon the achievement of his or her students
- Ask questions about that challenge
- Describe what he or she currently knows and what he or she is doing about it
- Identify where he or she can work with the coach to receive the most helpful feedback.

The coach's role is to:

- Review and determine the best way to provide feedback to the teacher
- Plan how to provide support with input from the teacher.

Chapter 3 provides more detail about the process of using the action plan.

Job-embedded Work

The action plan assists the teacher in identifying the kind of support he or she needs to solve the current instructional challenge. Together the coach and the teacher determine what their job-embedded work will look and sound like. This work might find the coach demonstrating an assessment tool or instructional approach for the teacher. It might manifest as the coach working alongside the teacher to evaluate student work or conduct small group instruction. The coach might be watching the teacher work with the whole group, small groups, or individuals. The approach the coach uses to support the teacher is dependent upon the amount of

assistance the individual teacher needs. Chapter 4 provides a more detailed explanation of how the coach prepares for work alongside the teacher.

The role of the teacher in the job-embedded work with the coach is to:

- Be prepared for the work time with the coach
- Be willing to ask for help when it's needed.

The role of the coach when working alongside the teacher is to:

- Stay focused on the teacher's question
- Collect information to support the teacher's work
- Ask questions that will allow both of them to best help the teacher reflect on practice.

Instructional Dialogue

The coach and teacher set aside time to have a conversation about the work the teacher has been doing and the work they have done together. This instructional dialogue is between fifteen and twenty minutes long. As a result of the dialogue, the teacher should have ideas for addressing his or her current challenge. The work during instructional dialogue is practical. The teacher has time to talk about what he or she has been doing. The coach listens, asks questions, and gives suggestions when needed. The dialogue provides the teacher with a plan for what to do next and strategies for how it might look and sound in practice. The coach and teacher will also discuss how this strategy will impact student learning. The teacher leaves the dialogue with a commitment to action—what he or she will do next. This includes collecting student work in order to confirm an impact on learning. This commitment will naturally lead into the next action plan. The coach's role in instructional dialogue is discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

The role of the teacher during instructional dialogue is to:

- Talk about his or her current action to solve the instructional challenges
- Analyze student work to determine the impact of his or her current action
- Determine what he or she will do next

- Determine why it should be effective (what is the understanding or knowledge behind the decision)
- Ask for support in how to implement the new strategy.

The role of the coach during instructional dialogue is to:

- Have an outcome for the dialogue and a plan for the support to be provided
- Listen carefully to what the teacher says
- Analyze student work
- Help the teacher set expectations for what he or she will do next
- Provide support, when needed, as to how this might look.

The purpose of the coaching experience is to develop the competence and confidence of teachers to meet the needs of the range of diverse learners in their classrooms. As a result of coaching, teachers become more reflective about their work as they work. By reflective I mean that they are thinking about their teaching as they teach and making changes along the way based upon student responses. Teachers' questions arise from their own instructional practice based on how effectively they raise student achievement. They are able to talk about what they are doing in their classrooms and why they are doing it. The success of this process rests on what the coach knows and is able to do. The next three chapters provide detailed descriptions of the skills a coach needs as a teacher developer.