

9-2017

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Faculty Development Through Cognitive Coaching

By Mary Antony Bair

This paper describes a faculty development project in which 12 teacher educators used the Cognitive Coaching model to engage in critical reflections about their teaching. Each identified an aspect of their teaching they wanted to improve and a colleague to serve as coach. Participants engaged in Cognitive Coaching cycles, consisting of planning and reflecting conferences. These experiences uncovered the promise and challenges of nurturing faculty development through Cognitive Coaching. Preliminary findings indicate that the educators' participation facilitated professional collegiality, personal self-renewal, and pedagogical improvement, suggesting that Cognitive Coaching has the potential to be an effective approach to faculty development.

THIS PAPER EXPLORES the process and outcomes of a faculty development project that used Cognitive Coaching as a peer mentoring strategy. Mentoring is well-recognized as an important tool in faculty development. Mentoring programs vary in elements of their design, such as objectives, roles, time, selection, matching, activities, resources, training, rewards, monitoring, and termination (Dawson, 2014). The literature recommends strategies that mentors should adopt (Foote & Solem, 2009), as well as characteristics that mentees should develop (Boice, 1992).

The traditional model of mentoring includes a hierarchical dyad of mentor and protégé or mentee (McCormack & West, 2006). Within this traditional model, an experienced faculty member works one-on-one with a new faculty member to support his or her career development. There is much evidence to support the benefits of the traditional model; faculty members with a mentor are reportedly more successful than those without one (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). Not only have mentoring relationships been found to increase productivity, they have also been found to provide a source of support and guidance and help reduce the isolation experienced by new faculty (Yun, Baldi, & Sorcinelli, 2016). While traditionally, new-career faculty have been assigned mentors within their own departments, researchers have also reported the success of intradepartmental mentoring by self-selected mentors (Troisi, Leder-Elder, Stiegler-Balfour, Fleck, & Good, 2015).

Notwithstanding the many potential benefits of mentoring, researchers have also identified some of the barriers in existing mentoring models. Much of the research has focused on early-career faculty (Driscoll, Parks, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Bannister, 2009; Friend & Gonzalez, 2009), but Rees and Shaw (2014) have pointed out the need for mentoring opportunities for mid-career faculty. Although the professional development needs of experienced faculty differ from those of their junior colleagues (Seldin, 2006), there are few mentoring groups tailored to the unique interests of each faculty member, and few are open to all regardless of rank (Fox, 2012). Thus, it appears the professional development needs of mid-career faculty members are often overlooked on college and university campuses (Huston & Weaver, 2008; Pastore, 2013).

Other researchers have pointed out yet another problem: the lack of mentoring support for women and faculty of color (Brayboy, 2003; Zambrana et al., 2015). This occurs in a larger context of mentoring process problems. Foote and Solem (2009) noted that, often, mentors receive very little training in how to mentor, and Mullen (2005) reported that mentor/mentee pairings are often incompatible. Finally, some faculty members have reported dissatisfaction with the contrived collegiality of some of the mentoring models that are implemented at universities (Hargreaves, 1994).

Given some of these limitations of a traditional one-on-one mentoring model, a new model of mu-

tual mentoring has emerged that involves a professional network of mentors. Within this model, there is shared responsibility for mentoring; individuals build networks of mentors and collaborate with multiple mentoring partners (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). Sorcinelli and Yun have noted that such reciprocal relationships benefit both the mentor and the mentee, since all faculty have something to teach to and learn from each other. Similarly, other researchers have suggested that, given the complex nature of academic work, mentoring is most effective when undertaken by several colleagues rather than a single mentor (Mathews, 2003; Peluchette, & Jeanquart, 2000; van Emmerik, 2004).

Therefore, in searching for ways to create a supportive, inclusive academic community for all faculty, some institutions are now turning to peer mentoring or peer coaching models (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Yun et al. (2016) recently provided compelling data on the positive outcomes of the mutual mentoring model. Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2016) is one such peer mentoring model that provides a structured process for peer coaching. The fundamental premise of Cognitive Coaching is that individuals have inner resources to achieve excellence; the role of a coach is to activate these inner resources by providing nonevaluative guidance to a colleague seeking professional improvement. Cognitive Coaching has been used extensively in public schools for almost two decades (Edwards, 2015), but its use in higher education is largely unexamined, although there is some evidence of Cognitive Coaching being explored as a strategy for faculty development in teacher education (Batt, 2009) and nursing education (Maskey, 2009).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the literature on faculty development by describing the origin, elements, and outcomes of a project that used Cognitive Coaching to create a mutual mentoring community within which faculty could conduct systematic, critical reflections about a self-identified aspect of their own teaching. The hope was that such collaborative self-studies would support faculty in instructional self-improvement while also increasing faculty engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Conceptual Framework

This faculty development project was guided by Knowles' (1975) notion of andragogy, the method and practice of educating adult learners. He assumed that adult learners are inherently self-directed and articulated the steps of self-directed learning: (a) setting a climate of mutual respect and support, (b) diagnosing learning needs, (c) formulating learning goals, (d) identifying human and material resources for learning, (e) choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and (f) evaluating learning outcomes.

The Cognitive Coaching model (Costa & Garmston, 2016) aligns closely with these principles of andragogy. The first step in the model involves establishing trust between the mentor and mentee by maintaining a nonjudgmental stance. All interactions begin with positive presuppositions, or positive assumptions about the capability of the person being coached (Costa & Garmston, 2002). The goal is not to fix someone; instead, the ultimate goal of Cognitive Coaching is "the ability to self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-evaluate" (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993, p. 57). The focus is on helping people become self-directed.

Cognitive Coaching is based on the premise that there are five states of mind, or internal drives, in every person: (a) consciousness (awareness of self and others), (b) efficacy (confidence in one's own abilities), (c) flexibility (openness to other perspectives), (d) craftsmanship (working toward excellence), and (e) interdependence (recognizing systems) (Costa & Garmston, 2016). Structured conversations help activate these states of mind.

In the coaching process, structured conversation models, called conversation maps, are used to facilitate three types of conversations: planning conversations, reflective conversations, and problem-resolving conversations (Costa & Garmston, 2016, pp. 199-239). A planning conversation map is used to stimulate mental rehearsal before a lesson—to bring to consciousness in the colleague the elements that need to be planned. It involves the systematic clarification of the goals of the upcoming lesson, the specification of success indicators, a plan for collecting evidence, the anticipation of strategies that may be used to achieve the goals, and the establishment of processes for self-assessment. The planning conversation may include questions

such as: What are you hoping to accomplish with this lesson? What evidence will show that you have been successful? What are some strategies that you are planning to use? What do you want to pay attention to in yourself? (Costa & Garmston, 2013).

The reflective conversation map is used after an event to analyze and make sense of the experience. The coach encourages the educator to summarize impressions of the lesson or event, analyze factors that may have caused the event to unfold the way it did, formulate new learnings, and commit to application of these new learnings (Costa & Garmston, 2016).

A problem-resolving conversation map is used when colleagues are stuck and unsure what to do. Mentors first validate their mentees' existing state of mind, then help the mentees identify the desired state and locate and amplify inner resources that will help them achieve that desired state. During the problem-resolving process, mentors employ the careful use of questions to understand the mentees' current state of mind and help them move from the current state to a more desirable state (Costa & Garmston, 2016). For example, the coaches might try to shift the mentees from a lack of self-awareness to self-awareness (consciousness); from an external locus of control to internal locus of control (efficacy); from narrow, egocentric views to broader, alternative perspectives (flexibility); from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance (craftsmanship); and/or from isolation and separateness to concern for the greater common good (interdependence).

Methods

Context

This project occurred in a college of education at a large, Midwestern, comprehensive liberal arts university. Improving program quality has long been a strategic goal of this college. Over the years, faculty have come together to explore ways to enhance teaching quality. Numerous mentoring models have also been tried, including assigning faculty to professional learning groups, assigning mentors to incoming faculty, and faculty expertise/mentoring circles. Although faculty members reported that these collaborative activities were enjoyable, they wanted sustained opportunities to talk with colleagues about their teaching experi-

ences and struggles in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and inclusivity. Thus, the goal of this project was to address this need and provide faculty with regular opportunities and a structure for talking about and reflecting on critical moments in their teaching practice.

Procedure

I applied for and received a grant from the university's Faculty Teaching and Learning Center to support this faculty development project. The dean of the college of education and two department heads supplemented the grant with additional funds. Initially funded for one year (2014-15), following unanimous requests from the faculty and by common consent from the administrators, the project was funded for a second year (2015-16). Funds were used to pay for three aspects of the program: training in Cognitive Coaching, faculty stipends (\$200 each year), and lunches during monthly meetings. Each year, faculty participants were also provided with a researcher journal; faculty used these to document their experiences.

Faculty participants were required to: (a) complete eight days of training in Cognitive Coaching, (b) attend monthly meetings held during the academic year, (c) complete a coaching cycle in between face-to-face meetings, (d) complete a collaborative self-study of teaching practice, and (e) submit the results of the self-study to a scholarly peer-reviewed conference. Other than these requirements, the project was organic, emerging from and evolving in response to faculty needs.

Twelve faculty members volunteered to participate in the project, representing six different programs (Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Leadership, Literacy Studies, Social Foundations, Special Education, and Teacher Education). Participants included faculty of all ranks, from nontenured instructors to full professors. The group included females and males from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

While self-study about teaching effectiveness was the shared domain of interest, Cognitive Coaching was adopted as the structured process to guide our interactions. All participants attended eight days of training, which provided them with a common vocabulary and a set of processes to use during coaching interactions. During these workshops participants learned about the five states of mind;

they also learned how to ask probing questions, listen actively, pause, and paraphrase during the different types of coaching conversations.

The group, called the Cognitive Coaching self-study (CCSS) group, met approximately once a month during the 2014-16 academic years. Meetings during the first year focused on practicing the coaching skills. The self-study component took center stage during the second year. Topics and concerns that emerged from one meeting shaped the topic of the following meeting.

Participants identified an aspect of their teaching that they wanted to improve and embarked on small-group, collaborative self-studies (LaBoskey, 2004), being coached through the process by a colleague. Aspects selected included decreasing students' research anxiety, improving faculty feedback, improving online instruction, and improving field supervision. Within the self-selected small groups, faculty took turns playing the role of a coach—helping their colleagues plan studies, gather evidence, and reflect on their practice. The process of coaching entailed a series of interactions: preobservation planning conferences, nonevaluative classroom observations, postobservation reflective conferences, and problem-resolving conferences. Faculty also took turns playing the role of a meta coach, who observed and provided feedback on the coaching process itself. The strength of these small mentoring groups varied, with some groups meeting more frequently than others. However, all groups came together for the monthly meetings.

Data

Several pieces of data helped us determine whether we were accomplishing our goals. The contents of the monthly lunch conversations (agenda, minutes, documents that were shared) were the first source. Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) recommend writing as a method of inquiry, arguing that putting thoughts in writing enables the researcher to see connections or aspects that may not have been foreseen. Richardson also recommends the use of a researcher journal to record emerging insights. All throughout the project, I analyzed the data as they were gathered, and wrote reflective memos in my researcher journal. In these memos I summarized emergent themes, developed working hypotheses about what was occurring, documented aspects of

the project that seemed to be working well, and noted concerns or topics that needed to be explored further in subsequent meetings. These analytic memos were the second source of data.

Each participant was encouraged to make reflective and analytical entries in their researcher journals. These entries were related to their self-study topic as well as their experiences with the Cognitive Coaching process within the small group and the whole group. At the end of each academic year, each of the 12 participants submitted a final summative reflection, which became a third source of data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process of reading, coding, and organizing coded data into themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The purpose was to understand the experiences of faculty members who participated in the CCSS group. Analysis occurred in two stages: the first while the project was active, and the second after the project was completed.

The final data analysis began with a review of all the documents that had been gathered, and a careful reading of the monthly meeting data, my reflective memos, and the participants' final reports. Open codes were utilized to identify sections of data that might be useful (Merriam, 2009). Examples of codes that emerged included trust, safe, vulnerable, support, assumptions, presuppositions, expert, and nonjudgmental. Codes were grouped to form the following categories: professional community; trust group; collegiality; nonjudgmental stance; coach, not expert; importance of listening; impact on teaching; and impact on scholarly engagement. These categories were then examined for patterns or trends leading to the identification of key themes that characterized the impact on participants in this project – Collegiality, Mentoring Skills, Teaching, and Scholarship.

Findings

At the end of two years, 10 of the 12 participants had completed all the project requirements. Their descriptions of their experiences were overwhelmingly positive in terms of a new-found feeling of authentic collegiality, improvement in mentoring skills, and impact on teaching and scholarship.

Authentic Collegiality

Participation in this faculty development process facilitated a feeling of camaraderie among the participants. Faculty who attended the same training sessions ate lunch together and got to know each other. Mentor-mentee pairs were formed between faculty who formerly did not even know each other.

Professional community. All participants found some element of the professional community and authentic collegiality they had sought. For example, one participant wrote: “This (finally!) is what I had hoped that teaching at a university would be like. Thoughtful people with a common purpose, working across disciplines, invested in each other’s professional growth, learning with and from each other in the service of our students.” Another said, “Without this opportunity, we would have continued to work and struggle, largely alone. Now, we have a safe community of support.” A third participant noted that “this fellowship facilitated deep connections that went beyond the simple perfunctory interactions we had previously shared.” The sense of community that many participants yearned for was found in sharing a common experience and focusing on a common condition: development of practice.

Trust group. The CCSS mentoring group was based on a shared culture that was nurtured over two years through the workshops, practice sessions, and monthly meetings. However, this process was not easy; there had been an element of risk involved in laying bare feelings of vulnerability. For example, one participant noted, “Even though I trust my colleagues, it was uncomfortable at first to reveal weaknesses in my teaching.” But another pointed out, “In making myself vulnerable before my peers, I have truly developed a trust group.” Everyone was buoyed by the commitment of others. One noted, “Trust is a central value in CC and I think the fact that all members of the group have committed to that value has been incredibly helpful.... Now we have a safe community of support.” There seemed to be a relationship between the willingness to be vulnerable and the emergence of trust with others.

Mentoring Skills

Nonjudgmental stance. Cognitive Coaching requires a nonjudgmental stance, which was challenging for some participants. One noted, “I realized, to my chagrin, that I had a number of some-

what negative presuppositions about the graduate candidates whom I was coaching—not personally, but with respect to professional practice.” Others realized that beginning with positive presuppositions (a key element of Cognitive Coaching) was transformational: “assuming the best about everyone’s intention significantly changes the dynamic of conversations and interactions.” Another said, “Cognitive coaching demanded positive presuppositions.... When I asked questions with genuine positive presuppositions, I was better able to discover in candidates’ responses opportunities for nurturing their own self-direction.” This was a foundational shift in perspective, which generated other changes.

Coach, not expert. Sometimes it was a challenge to bypass the typical expectations of faculty to respond as experts and learn the new role of coach. A participant stated, “I learned that I needed to curb my desire to serve as the expert who could solve the other’s problem. I needed instead to act as a mediator whose role was to develop self-directed persons.” The need to redefine one’s role in educational practice was a common experience. By the end of the second year, both senior and junior faculty referred to each other as coaches, demonstrating the nonhierarchical nature of the coaching process.

Importance of listening. For those who profess for a living, relearning the importance of listening was difficult. As one participant put it, “I learned that my own desire for closure and comfort were leading to unproductive patterns of listening, responding, and inquiring. I tended to ask inquisitive questions instead of clarification questions. I also found that I find silence uncomfortable.” Moving the presentation of themselves from expert to coach shifted participants’ attention toward the other. They found that listening for the intentions of others was very different from listening with the intention to change others.

Teaching

Participants reported that this project had affected them in significant ways. “The planning meetings I had helped me ... visualize my goals with a clarity that I doubt I would have otherwise achieved,” reported one. Another realized that “my interactions with my students, in particular graduate students, have been enhanced.... I am grounded in

the moment and responsive to their needs.” Another found this project “made me more conscious of truly listening to the students, using paraphrasing and having them state how they see their successes.”

These professional development experiences were also translated into teaching in meaningful ways for many participants. One participant shared the way she used Cognitive Coaching when she supervised students in their clinical placements. “Rather than the instructor-as-expert telling the candidate what the instructor thinks after analyzing the lesson, I, the instructor as coach, facilitate the candidates’ self-reflection and evaluation of student progress toward learning goals, as well as their own progress toward their own professional growth.” Another participant used the planning conversation map to help students clarify the goals for their capstone research proposal, identify resources or strategies needed to meet their goals, and identify areas that they needed to be attentive to in order to be successful. “By conducting a planning conversation my students walk away feeling like they had direction and guidance—all a result of their own self-directed learning.” Interestingly, two participants who had implemented Cognitive Coaching strategies into their teaching received university awards for excellence in teaching.

Scholarship

An emphasis on scholarship and professional craftsmanship lent an air of credibility to the entire effort and avoided any stigma of remediation that is sometimes associated with faculty development. Furthermore, extensive administrative support—demonstrated by funding for stipends, training, monthly lunches, and the purchase of books—conveyed the institutional message that critical reflection about teaching was a normal, desirable professional habit and boosted the motivation and scholarly engagement of the participants. By the end of the second year, 10 of the 12 participants had presented their work at various peer-reviewed education conferences. Generous support from the faculty development center and college administrators has enabled the project to continue into its third year with sixteen participants and a focus on learner-centered instruction.

Implications

Some specific strategies facilitated the success of this faculty development project. The project was initiated and developed by faculty. All of the members voluntarily went through eight days of training in Cognitive Coaching. Having a shared repertoire of coaching strategies and conversation maps to guide our interactions diminished reluctance to seek the assistance of a coach, and to coach more senior faculty.

Faculty members had the opportunity to group themselves into dyads and triads based on shared interests and concerns. These small groups met and coached each other at mutually convenient times, thus maintaining active participation between the monthly meetings. Furthermore, the process of self-selected mentoring groups, based not on rank but on the unique interests of faculty members, also helped to break down the barriers between junior, mid-career, and senior faculty. Our findings support what others have found, that programs stand a better chance of success if they are designed in direct response to the concerns of faculty members (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006).

Establishing authentic communities of practice in which development occurs requires creating trust among faculty, garnering support from administrators, and initiating structures that allow for development to occur in a professional, nonjudgmental setting. Initial analysis indicates that participation in regular meetings over a period of two years helped develop a sense of trust among the participants. The non-judgmental nature of interactions facilitated personal self-renewal, instructional improvement, and professional collegiality. The CCSS group also helped to break down the “isolation experienced by some faculty and [made] us aware of the commonality of our individual experiences” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 141).

Although the outcomes presented here are tentative, they are compelling. Our experiences suggest that Cognitive Coaching has the potential to be an effective approach to faculty development not previously reported in the literature. In fact, following a meeting with some of the faculty from this project, the Faculty Development Center of another university decided to offer Cognitive Coaching training to faculty and staff in departments all across that university (Eastern Michigan University, 2017). Re-

search into efforts like this university-wide training in Cognitive Coaching will help determine whether our findings can be generalized beyond a college of education. Additional research is also needed to examine the nature of mentor-mentee relationships, and factors that contribute to the evolution of these relationships over time.

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