Collegial Coaching: The Art of Conversation

April Major, Vista La Mesa Elementary School

Angie Guerrero, High Tech High Chula Vista

Many people think that to coach colleagues through the twists and turns of improving their practice, you need to have all the answers. With this image of all knowing arbiters or truth in mind, it is easy to see why some teachers feel ill equipped to help their colleagues. But we recently learned that it is through carefully constructed conversations that teachers can offer support, wisdom and knowledge to one another - and they can do so without ever offering an answer.

As part of a seminar on leadership, we were asked to observe a colleague, have a conversation about that observation and write a reflection about the process. In preparation, we explored specific protocols and role-played imaginary collegial conversations. Equipped with some background and practice with protocols and an earnest desire to fine-tune the art of collegial conversations, we set off to watch the happenings in other classrooms in our schools. Here we tell our separate stories, then reflect together on our experiences.

April’s Story

I teach 6th grade in a self-contained classroom at my school, where I have been teaching for 11 years. Faced with the charge of conducting a collegial coaching protocol, I had to tackle logistics and a bit of fear. Because I do not have a special prep period, I decided to use my recess time. I asked a fellow teacher if she could walk my students to and from recess to allow me the 20 minutes I needed. Next, I asked a 1st grade teacher who is a friend and much respected colleague if I could observe her. This teacher got her master’s in school administration three years ago, and during that time she chose me to do a similar task: pre-observation, observation, and debrief. I felt like this would be a comfortable setting for me to get my feet wet.

My colleague was amazing to watch, and she remarked that her teaching has really improved over the past couple of years due to a focus on student-student and student-teacher interactions. I started the debrief by asking, “How do you feel the lesson went?” and then gave warm feedback on what I saw, piggy-backing on what she had said. When we were discussing grouping methods, I mentioned reading that I’ve done regarding the grouping of high level with low level students. That launched a discussion of past experiences, current practices, and the differences we’ve seen with different methods.

As we spoke, my colleague said that our discussion was helping her think about next steps in a more purposeful way than if she had just reflected on her own. Having to explain her thinking aloud made her question her choices in different ways, and having someone to bounce ideas off
of helped direct her next steps. She is already very reflective and skilled, so an extension of thinking for both of us was the natural result of our dialogue.

**Angie’s Story**

I have only been a teacher for three and half years, so observing another teacher and facilitating a collegial conversation would have felt a little funny if it weren’t for the fact that my school has a system of peer observation in place already. Two teachers are assigned to visit each other’s rooms as “observation buddies” and debrief the observations together. Then we get a staff development day to debrief the whole process.

On the day I visited my buddy’s room, she facilitated a beautiful Socratic seminar. Her question for me was, “How can I get more students to engage in the conversation?” I was impressed with how well her class went. On the day she came to see me, it was a bit of a different situation. I wanted to know if students in my class were actively involved in a writing peer critique. She didn’t come in on a perfect day. Oh no. It was a raucous, mildly productive day where my lesson on writing went only partially the way I wanted it to. This, after her seemingly perfect Socratic seminar.

When my buddy and I met to debrief our observations, it was like getting together with a friend. Having specific things we were looking for was really helpful and allowed us to prepare clarifying and probing questions for one another. We started with reminding one another of our initial questions, and then moved to warm feedback and our questions for each other.

I asked my buddy how she selected those that were in the inner circle. Had she played with number of students or gender in groups before? What were the guidelines for participation? Were the seminars graded? What would an ideal seminar look like to her? What was she hoping to achieve with the seminar?

I like the protocol we used because it helped keep the conversation focused, allowed for celebrating the good, and emphasized questions rather than critique. The questions are the critique, but it is so much more comfortable to respond to questions than to listen to how to do things better or hear what the “right” answer is.

In the end, we had questions for one another that helped us talk in productive, supportive ways about our classes and ways to improve our craft. I liked that we observed each other. It placed both of us in the same position as teachers looking for feedback toward our development as educators.

**Our Reflections**

As we compared our reflections on the observation and debrief experience, it struck us that successful collegial conversations contain four elements: a peer approach (“we’re in this together”), appreciation of craft, the use of protocols, and open-ended questions.
A Peer Approach

If the “coach” has a mind-set of mutual respect, the teacher is bound to be an active partner in the reflection process. Being talked to as a peer alleviates stress and leads to a more productive conversation. It also helps the “coach.” Not only can it be intimidating to be observed, but it can also be challenging to be in the coach’s chair—so daunting that we may feel safer staying in our own classrooms. However, it is truly a gift to be able to watch a colleague teach. We can glean new approaches, see in action strategies that we’ve wanted to try, and, most important, feel part of a larger community. We should not be isolated in our classroom “huts.” The walls should be transparent, the road should be travelled both ways as observer and person observed, and the air should be supportive and conducive to growth because we are in this together.

Appreciation of Craft

Teachers are artists; our classrooms are our canvas. It is important to be mindful of this when entering a classroom for an observation. In a lesson, every word, worksheet, activity or grouping strategy is likely the result of hours of imagining, researching and planning. The difficulty, however, is that children are not paint or clay. They have lovely little minds of their own and do not always agree with or cooperate with the plans that we so carefully crafted. An observer may witness a lesson gone awry from time to time. When that happens, what should we observers do? Gloss over it? Pretend it didn’t happen? Make sure the teacher who was observed knows you saw it?

For times like these, one of our mentors has good advice: “Don’t throw frozen snowballs.” This icy metaphor refers to comments or questions aimed at highlighting flaws in a lesson or practice. Since most of us teachers are artists and professionals, we are our own worst critics. Ask us, “How did it go?” and likely we already know what went wrong, and are probably harder on ourselves than any visitor. Getting hit with a “snowball” is painful, especially if we have already jumped into frozen water of our own volition. This is why it helps to use a protocol that starts with warm feedback. Usually, allowing teachers a safe place to talk will be enough to encourage them to share what they honestly saw as the highlights and lowlights of the lesson. As both parties discuss these, they both learn how to better deal with challenging situations in the future.

The Power of Protocols

We wish we had a protocol for every important conversation in life. Imagine how much more productive talking with our parents, siblings and spouses would be if every word were accounted for and planned. There would never be a thoughtless comment that slipped out and unnecessarily hurt someone’s feelings. There might never be a fight in households ever again! That may be a bit of a stretch, but a good protocol can have an immense and positive effect on conversations we have with people we respect and work with.
The protocol we used is adapted from the Power of Protocols by Joseph McDonald (2007), which offers protocols for all manner of professional development. The conversation begins with the person who was observed: what their takeaways were, what their thoughts were, what questions they have. Although both parties learn and grow from the observation process, starting from their perspective and understanding is key. Let the person who was observed guide the conversation. Let them take you where they feel it is safe. You will likely go most of the places you need to from there.

The time allotted for “warm feedback” is crucial. It is so important that it is often the starting point in any protocol aimed at improving or discussing teachers’ work. Whether a brand new teacher, or a teacher of many years, it feels good to be celebrated for the hard work that goes into the art of teaching. Allowing the conversation to do just that validates the experiences of teachers, and better prepares them to push themselves to grow in a safe and comfortable way. When we have been told what is working, we hear that we are good. When we know we are appreciated and “good,” we proceed to discuss areas for growth, knowing that that discussion enhances our value as artists and teachers.

**Questions, not Answers**

The goal of observation and conversation is to foster growth and learning for all parties. Sometimes, this requires digging a little, pushing ourselves to question what we did, what we saw, and what we would all do differently or similarly in the future and why. Questions, not answers, are key. Giving advice can help a teacher for a moment in time, but asking open-ended questions can help a teacher grow indefinitely.

The questions we ask as colleagues shouldn’t be ones with right or wrong answers. If instead, you ask things like, “How do you feel the lesson went? What are your thoughts on ___? If you could do this again, what would you do differently?” you are opening the door to conversation. We use these types of questions with students after they have finished a projector presented their work. We ask them of ourselves after a lesson, unit of instruction, or year of teaching. We can use them with our colleagues as well to enrich our conversations and thinking.

When open-ended questions are the foundation, they provide a longer-lasting effect because teachers can ask those questions any time, even without a coach. They can become so much a part of our subconscious that they lead us to reflect on our work continuously and then fuel our desire to seek out conversation with others. After all, when we ask ourselves questions, we look to many places in order to find rewarding answers.

**Real Results from Gentle Leadership**

Being a successful collegial coach may not be what you think. It is not about being better than someone else. It is not about giving right answers or lots of advice. It is instead about using a peer approach, appreciating the craft underlying any lesson, adhering to protocols, and asking
open-ended questions. With these four elements in place, not only will you nurture mutual respect, but you will also help improve the practice of a colleague and likely yours as well. Most of all, you will instill the yearning to join a larger community of educators who seek out that never-ending conversation about our craft and our daily lives in classrooms.