



Professional Learning  
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## The College of Teachers: Coaching within a TLC Context

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## About the Author

**Dr Greg Cunningham** is currently the Director of Teacher Development and Accreditation and the College of Teachers. His PhD investigated the influence of reading on student response to visual texts. He has been a visiting educator in the United States and in the United Kingdom and he has presented papers that consider approaches to teaching and learning, particularly in understanding, pedagogy and teacher professional learning. He has represented the Independent Schools of NSW on the Professional Learning Committee at the NSW Education Standards' Authority. His interests include English teaching, teacher coaching and professional accreditation. A Fellow of Trinity College of Music London, he has also given organ recitals in London, Sydney and South Africa.

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- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

### About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

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# The College of Teachers: Coaching within a TLC Context



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## Abstract

Jan Robertson (2015) highlights the need for a listening, learning school culture that is crucial to the success in developing collegial relationships. Making coaching skills an essential part of a teacher's repertoire helps build this culture because it promotes not only collegiality but it also develops robust learning in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning.

Coaching conversations develop from shared deep reflection on practice. Given the cut and thrust of school life, it is not always easy to find space and place for these moments of thoughtful tranquillity. The creation of teacher learning communities (TLCs) within the teaching and learning framework at Barker College in 2018 has created an opportunity to extend the reach of coaching at the School. The TLC coaching strand offered teachers who seek to enhance their own practice an appropriate avenue for dialogue and reflection arising from their everyday interactions.

Coaching conversations are just as important in the informal interactions as they are in the more formal goal-setting or appraisal-type sessions. These deep conversations are different to other teaching 'conversations' where two people share their own stories, seldom delving into and enquiring further about anything a colleague might say and often creating two completely separate storylines.

Deep learning conversations are most likely to occur when the focus is on one aspect of practice. Drawing on coaches from Barker's College of Teachers, these conversations involved a coach listening, observing practice and learning by asking their coachee questions and with that other person learning by reflecting on and then articulating and explaining their practice. Coaching relationships within the 2018 TLC coaching strand offered opportunities for reflection and illumination, both for the coach and their coachee. This paper seeks to include reflections from both coaches and coachees on the coaching moments brought about through their involvement in this strand of the TLC.

Deep inquiry and critical reflection on practice provides teachers with opportunities to ask themselves: What do I bring to this practice? What do I still need to learn? What will I try in our work together tomorrow? They may ask these questions silently, or preferably feel

safe to sound out their thinking and questions publicly. When teachers share in this way, everyone involved is a learner:

My coachee and I have met on three different occasions to discuss ideas around teaching and our ways of managing classes, school expectations, etc. and I think that has been really useful to build a rapport and a sense of trust with my coachee. He has offered ideas and come to see a part of one of my lessons and we have had a brief chat afterwards about that.

In education, however, it is the bigger issues and changes affecting teaching that are the most difficult to explore through coaching. This is because they require us to examine our very understanding of what it means to be a teacher in today's educational climate. Effort to understand and solve complex problems typically causes a potential difference of opinion in our current thinking and it is this dissonance that challenges our values, beliefs and ways of seeing the world. That challenge, though, makes possible our deepest learning and, from there, the biggest changes we are consequently likely to make in terms of our identity and practice as educators.

The deepest learning conversations not only focus on immediate concerns and individual needs but also arise out of deep learning relationships. These relationships are ongoing. They include trust, respect and shared commitment to the study of teaching and learning. They also involve reciprocal learning opportunities. Importantly, they are free of judgement and therefore are a place of safety — a place where it feels secure to reveal hopes and fears:

My experience has been a positive one. I have always appreciated the opportunity of having an observer review my lessons and my experience at Barker has been no different. The discussions between my coach and me have been insightful, honest, frank, constructive and supportive and have all resulted in implementable changes to the way I prepare and/or deliver a lesson. My coach has also been able to provide reading material to support our discussions. This has enabled me to further reflect on our discussions throughout the term.

These relationships are actually partnerships in learning and all that that concept entails. The deeper the relationship is, the more easily our coaching partner can ask us, in a challenging but always supportive way, to question the purposes and goals of our current practice. The collaborative coaching conversation, arising from shared teaching environments, is perhaps a less threatening learning approach for us than larger, group learning forums. Focusing on one aspect of shared practice with a colleague and thoroughly critiquing it in the light of shared goals and desired outcomes, helps us to stand back from our everyday practice and to look more objectively at how our own teaching and learning and, in time, that of others is currently playing out in the educational context of today.

As the level of trust grows within learning relationships and coaching skills develop, colleagues not only feel better able to ask one another the more challenging questions, but are also more willing to share areas needing development. They feel sufficiently safe to move away from covering up any perceived areas of weakness as is too often the case in professional development directed toward improved practice:

I think (hope) both of us have gained from the experience. I have made some observations to my coachee and I have picked up a few ideas that I have tried with my classes. I am keeping a coaching diary which includes the documentation that was given to us, my comments from through the lesson, takeouts for me and reflections from after we have met and discussed post lesson.

The deepest learning occurs when we are encouraged, through courageous, supportive and therefore effective coaching practice, to locate our own areas for development and new learning and to discuss them with coaching partners even when we feel vulnerable doing so.

With regard to vulnerability, power relations or conflicts of purpose such as a coach also being a senior leader or an appraiser, can adversely affect the relationship. But these tensions are not insurmountable if the relationship is sensitively negotiated and understood. Coaches need to be authentic and skilled, socially and emotionally, and our peers can fulfil this role with the right level of support and supervision of coaching practice. Peer coaching and/or collaborative teaching develop greater levels of collegiality, a natural development of which can be group coaching.

A listening, learning school culture is also vital to the success of collegial relationships. Making coaching skills an essential part of teachers' and leaders' repertoires helps build this culture because it promotes a virtuous cycle of collegiality and robust learning in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning:

We started off with identifying potential goals to work towards which was helpful. I had plenty I could've explored. One of the specific focuses was I wanted to work on my Year 10 class behaviour management methods because that class seemed to respond quite differently to my other classes. We discussed different ways to approach the issue with teaching styles of PowerPoint, worksheet, games, etc. to trial. I also implemented new seating plans and new class rules at the beginning of Term 2. The main gain was exploring the teacher-student relationship and how I viewed that. I had to change my style from Term 1 to Term 2, which wouldn't have been easy for the students to respond to, but it was necessary. The culmination of that relationship change was when I unfortunately had to give literally more than half my class Friday detentions. (It wasn't related to in-class behaviour, but rather addressing the apathy towards homework and effort that I believe was fostered in part, from my previously 'relaxed' teaching style). It's important to know the students individually in how to manage behaviour, but there also has to be some element of autocracy in classroom rules and expectations. It's something I'm sure I will continue to learn and improve for many years.

In any coaching relationship, the ability to listen deeply is just as important as asking the questions that count. Asking without listening and listening without asking does not create dialogue, but rather monologue. True dialogue is what facilitates the change process. Each partner needs to serve as a coach who can take the other beyond the 'what and the how' of teaching and leadership practice and into the metacognitive realm of critically thinking about that practice:

The experience has been rewarding. My coach fitted into the classroom easily and naturally. There was nothing awkward about his presence. He interacted with some of my students during the lesson, becoming involved in the lesson in similar ways to them. I have found the discussions which the lessons generated to be thought-provoking and questions; that is why a trusting ongoing learning relationship is so important.

Ultimately, when we're asked questions that delve deep into our identity of what it means to teach or lead, we come right down to the basis of our depth of accountability to the students we have in our care. The 2018 TLC coaching strand feedback has shown coaches and coachees who are in strong coaching relationships not only feel a strengthening of their moral purpose, but also the agency and courage to act on it.

The ultimate outcome of having deep learning conversations set within deep learning relationships is that teachers tend not only to feel supported, but also have the opportunity to think critically through their current practice with a view to their future practice. With these supports and processes in place, they have the tools and confidence to develop their approaches to education that improve the quality of teaching and learning practice in ways that count.

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