Learning from observation: peer coaching
Newall Green School, Manchester

‘Coaching made me more prepared to experiment with my teaching’
‘it is a reflective tool that makes me think about my teaching’
‘coaching is non threatening and makes you think of new ways of teaching’.

These are quotes from teachers at a school where coaching has captured the commitment and enthusiasm of those who have been involved in the early stages of a coaching programme. After one year, during which the school conducted a pilot enquiry which tracked the performance of students, coaching is also beginning to make a difference to the results of the end of key stage tests. The school’s performance at GCSE had already moved from 17% in 2002 to a 2004 position of 50%. The school is now confident that using coaching will help advance this further in 2005:
‘performance in GCSEs in the 5 A – C category will hit the national standard of 56% and coaching will play a part in contributing to this achievement’.

The context
Situated in South Manchester, Newall Green High school is a co-educational comprehensive school with 946 students on roll and a waiting list for all years. It is a city comprehensive serving Wythenshawe and Benchill, the most socially deprived ward in England. 52% of students are entitled to free meals and 35% are on the special needs register.

Why coaching?
The school felt that ‘traditional’ methods of staff professional development were not working for every member of staff. Leaders were increasingly aware of the potential they had within their own school. According to Neil Wilson, head teacher,
‘the majority of the solutions to the challenges and problems we face can be found within our own team of teachers. We have a vast array of knowledge, expertise and skills within our teaching team and we must continually tap into it’.

When the opportunity arose to join the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network the school was keen to participate: ‘...we are always striving to improve teaching and learning and we saw coaching as a way that would engage us in different strategies to improve classroom practice. We wanted to see, at an early stage, that there was an impact on standards, because everything we do at Newall Green is done to raise student achievement’.

What type of coaching is used?
A lack of hierarchy and status, and learning with and from each other were key principles of coaching from the outset. Coaching at Newall Green is a confidential process of peer coaching through which professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices, share ideas, teach one another and collaboratively solve problems in the workplace.

How is coaching used at this school?
The school had already established a mentoring system for new staff members, which involved a trusted, more senior colleague offering practical assistance regarding the culture and day to day running of the
community. To complement this, coaching focuses on the development and sharing of craft knowledge to improve the confidence and competence of teachers in the classroom. Unlike the mentoring programme within the school, coaching is about equal partnership. Adrian Rolfe, the coaching coordinator, was very aware of mistakes which had been made in the past when:

‘this type of activity was expert led and tended to be where a senior leader would work with a middle manager, who in turn would work with a junior member of the department. What happened was that there was a one way dialogue which was often counter-productive. We wanted to break away from this because we had learned that the best development occurs when you work with a colleague on an equal footing with no status issues’.

In starting out on the journey the coordinator explained that improved student outcome was the priority. The senior lead teacher made the decision that in the initial stage coaching would involve staff working with year nine pupils. They decided to carry out a pilot enquiry which would track the performance of the students and provide data to determine whether teacher involvement in coaching made a difference to their value added performance in end of key stage tests. There was also a commitment that staff who were to be involved would be encouraged to engage with colleagues across traditional subject department boundaries, so that they could explore whether, and to what extent, different subject specialists could inform and support each other’s learning.

Staff were invited to be involved and teachers from English, maths and science volunteered to take part. Their commitment echoed the sentiments of the head teacher. For example, the literacy coordinator explained:

‘having been involved in off-site training I found it difficult to cascade the learning back in school. Being involved in coaching enabled us to have a dialogue about what we were doing in our own context and it is much more effective’.

**What takes place?**

Having taken the time to prepare, plan and co-ordinate coaching the school was ready to have a go. Central to the peer coaching would be classroom observation, but, unusually, the teacher would coach the observer.

The school has deliberately adopted what they described as ‘a reverse coach/coachee’ model, and a process was built around this which involved a pre-conference, lesson observation and a post-conference.

**Pre-conference**

At the pre-conference the teacher who is coaching the observer explains the lesson purpose, what led to the lesson, and what will follow. Protocols, confidentialities and the specific focus of the coaching are established.

**The observation**

During the observation spaces are provided where interaction and discussion take place. It is about ‘coaching in action’ and both the coach and coachee - or professional learner - are active participants and learners. The model is intended to separate the observations from more formal
lesson observations which the teachers saw as ‘someone else’s agenda’ and ‘more about performance management’. What the teachers continually reiterated was the sheer joy of engaging with another colleague’s teaching, from a learning and not an accountability starting point. One of the teachers commented:

‘we had never done it like this before; when we entered each other’s room we became active participants. We engaged with the students and found opportunities to talk to each other during the lesson. Evette’s teaching style was very different to mine, she did lots of group activities and I realized I must introduce more into my teaching’.

Examples of foci included ‘group activity’ and ‘using visual aids to support questioning.’ Intentionally, part of the coaching process occurs in the classroom whilst the teaching and learning are going on. This gives the coach and the professional learner the opportunity to identify and capture the ‘nitty gritty’ issues that can have significant impact on learning about classroom practice but are often lost in later conversation.

Post-conference
These ‘nitty gritty’ issues provide the starting point for the post-conference conversations. The teachers described these as detailed conversations, which provided opportunities to reflect on the key points of the lesson. The person being coached describes his/ her experience in the classroom, and then the coach begins the process of prompting and probing a reflective dialogue, to enable the professional learner to arrive at a deeper level of understanding of the experience and commit to new learning.

Wider learning
The school has also recently established a ‘reflective practitioner group’ which meets on a regular basis to enable colleagues involved in paired peer coaching to share their learning with a wider group by describing and discussing their experiences. In this way the school wants to create new knowledge in a collective form for the whole school community.

The group also uses videos of staff teaching.
‘The videos are about us and that is why we volunteered. I don’t really want to watch lessons that involve children from a school that is unrelated to the context in which I work. I want to see lessons that involve interruptions and, at times, negative behaviour. In our videos you see warts and all and that underpins what coaching is about’.

By using videos generated within their own context, staff felt that the learning was ‘rooted in reality and had real purpose……they were not about having a cozy chat and then doing nothing’.

All coaching and reflective conversations are part of a cycle of activity which is outcome focused. According to the teachers, peer coaching allows them to think about teaching and learning in ways which they hadn’t previously done, and to try new ways of working without fear of failure. Having the opportunity to develop in this way was not seen as a luxury, or something that was a ‘bolt on activity’ to school development, rather it was a key priority and rigorous endeavour to improve classroom practice.
Resourcing peer coaching
The commitment to collaboration is also evident in the time and resources that the school dedicates to coaching. As coordinator, Adrian has a budget and a guarantee that teacher time will be available for all stages – pre-meeting, classroom observations, post-conference and network time. This occurs both within and outside teaching time. Each school in the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network was given a budget of two thousand pounds to introduce and support the development of coaching.

Overcoming obstacles
The school plans to involve all staff over the next few years. As part of this commitment they have tried to anticipate possible barriers and have said that they will:

- ensure there is the coaching expertise to support increased staff participation;
- protect and extend time for coaching;
- ensure increased staff participation in the network to maximize learning; and
- consistently evaluate the impact of coaching on standards

Skills and attributes
Staff commitment was seen to be essential for the success of the coaching programme. Staff were also very aware of the need to develop the necessary skills to be effective coaches, and engaged in ongoing training within the network and as members of a school practitioner group. Their initial training involved working with an external consultant who was a very experienced coach. This was seen as essential and a very powerful influence.

One teacher described it as ‘inspirational and there is a need for that initial impetus’. Another teacher believed that to engage in coaching without the necessary skills can ‘actually do more harm than good’. Investing time in gaining the necessary skills involved the teachers in a series of training activities.

One particular training activity involved the teachers in a role-play as coach and professional learner. The purpose of the activity was to develop questioning and reflective skills within a peer coaching session. ‘We videoed our role play of a coaching session and then played it back to analyse our performance. It was about reflection and checking out understanding, not making assumptions and not being judgmental’.

To support their ambition to learn from their own practice through coaching, Newall Green benefited from the fact that the school was already committed to innovative practice that makes a difference, and was supported by a collaborative culture. According to the teachers: ‘what we have at this school is a very supportive staff who are collaborative and there is an open door policy’. The culture at Newall Green was about learning from and with each other, and coaching seems to be taking such activity to a more profound and rigorous level.

In describing their approach to coaching the head teacher said:

‘it is a very collegiate approach, where everyone has a voice and more importantly knows they will be listened to’.

This is a bold statement for a head teacher to make, but it is evident to an external observer that the school culture is genuinely collaborative. The school culture plus the investment in coaching training...
may help explain why the school did not experience an initial reluctance amongst staff to be observed as many other schools have done.

Links and Networks
The school sees its involvement in the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network as fundamental in supporting activity. The involvement in the network according to Adrian Rolfe:

‘provides a rich source of learning, training and support’.

It was within the network that Adrian met colleagues from other schools to learn about their methods of coaching and to share experiences of practice. It was within the network that Newall Green took their first steps to engage with coaching. The school constantly looks to the network for on-going support, stimulation and also celebration. According to the school, this network is the place where the transfer of knowledge between schools occurs.

Emerging outcomes
There are early signs that coaching is making a difference. For example, the pilot enquiry into the performance in Key Stage 3 tests showed an increase of over 3 points on the value added score of students taught by teachers involved in the coaching programme. The coaching across departmental boundaries has also had an impact on classroom teaching. For example working with the English department has influenced the maths department which has now established ‘maths writing groups’. Similarly the English coordinator enthusiastically described her involvement in a science lesson and her discovery of the parallel skills in writing up an experiment and writing a recount. An unanticipated outcome of the cross-department work is that it has also demonstrated and modeled learning for the students:

‘you don’t realise that the students just see you in isolation but it was so powerful when they saw us working together and teaching each other’.

Staff generally agree that they have improved their personal and collective expertise, as well as their ability to support each other’s learning.