

# A Model Coach-Teacher

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2015

#### A. Description of Training

Holly is a trainer of teachers. She has worked in Jenison Public Schools as a classroom teacher for eighteen years, and in the last three Holly has taken on the role of training staff in the same district. The two years leading up to this one, Holly spent half her day teaching junior high science, then was an instructional coach for the secondary staff - tasked with raising the level of understanding of Common Core State Standards in regards to mathematics and literacy - for the approximately 120 teachers in the district grades 7-12. This year, Holly's position has shifted tremendously. She still teaches junior high science for half of her day, but now in the second half she is an instructional coach for a group of only five teachers, with whom she meets regularly. She is coaching them in best practices of teaching a new special at the elementary level. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) is being taught by these five teachers to all of the students in kindergarten through sixth grade in all of Jenison Public Schools. Holly is tasked with teaching these teachers how to best teach STEM.

In Holly's role as an instructional coach this year, Holly met ten days prior to the beginning of the school year with her cohort of teachers to teach them the content of this year's instruction, the new state science standards, as well as some best practices of teaching in an inquiry lab setting.

Now that the school year is begun, Holly visits each teacher once per week to plan lessons, watch the teacher teach, provide feedback for that teaching, and troubleshoot any questions the teacher has. Additionally, the group of five teachers meet once a month with Holly as a group. During that time, Holly teaches additional best practices and works on advancing the curricular knowledge of the teachers with whom she works.

#### B. Role in Organization

Holly has a unique role in both her program and the organization for which she works. She is the only instructional coach in the entire school district - there has never been one before either, and she is unique in that she is designing all of her own materials as she goes. Holly was, last year, recognized as Michigan's Science Teacher of

the Year by the Michigan Science Teachers Association and is seen as an expert in her field. In Jenison Public Schools, Holly is afforded a great amount of respect and freedom to be creative in her teaching.

#### C. Purpose of training

The purpose of the training Holly is conducting this year is to develop curriculum with and for the STEM teachers, to guide the teachers to a greater understanding of the best practices of teaching STEM, and to coach teachers to grow their own confidence as teacher who can guide students in a lab setting. Ultimately, the goal of Holly's work is that *students* gain a deeper understanding of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics - and she is working with the teachers in the elementary schools to facilitate that.

#### D. Beliefs and assumptions

Holly believes that the best professional development is that which is tailored specifically for the audience, and the smaller the audience is the tighter the tailoring can be. Holly spoke of the contrast between the training she provided the last two years when her audience was a very varied group of secondary teachers, to now the tightly concentrated group she works with. She stated that last year's training was quite difficult to plan for because the needs of her audience were so varied, while this year her audience is so small and has many of the same needs. This year is much easier for her.

One guiding assumption of Holly's training is that all of her learners enter with something to offer and that all can learn from one another. By working in the small group setting that she is this year, Holly feels better able to help her participants see this in themselves and others. In her role as instructional coach, Holly tries very hard to help her participants realize new understandings through her guiding questions and her facilitation techniques. She wants the teachers to be reflective and to come to their own learning through experiences. By having experiences and then talking about them in a coaching setting, Holly thinks that her participants can learn a great deal.

Thus, Holly has a mindset and approach to leading training that encourages reflection, much like the Honey-Mumford Learning Cycle. She has the teachers test new concepts and strategies in closed situations within the group, then have concrete experiences in their classrooms, followed by a time of reflection, then a time of forming new concepts and generalizations about teaching strategies.

Holly uses many Visible Thinking routines to help her participants reach new understanding and plan for their next learning cycle. Through Holly's weekly coaching and reflection sessions, she is really able to maximize the individualization and coaching that each trainee receives, really allowing for reflective practitioners. In this time of the educational craziness of rushing through material, meeting new standards, and taking high stakes assessments, the opportunity Holly offers her trainees to slow down and have the opportunity to reflect on the work they are doing is a real gift - to themselves as well as to the students with whom they work.

#### E. Adherence to design principles

When designing and developing training for her cohort, Holly has really made an effort to use student-centered strategies as frequently as possible. Holly said that she really tries to use the same structure as what she uses in her junior high classroom when working with her adult learners because those are the best practices. Holly says that it only makes sense that she is teaching the teachers using the same methods she is asking them to use so that they are both experiencing that kind of learning, as well as learning about it.

The student-centered approach to instruction that Holly uses is really in line with Branch's work. He says, "Student-centered strategies should be the guiding framework for accomplishing the performance objectives. The planned activities should be based on the performance objective and the student's background" (Branch 85). These student-centered strategies vary depending on the lesson, but

they all have very little teacher-up-front time in comparison to the time students have to work through the learning themselves.

The text *Active Training* begins with the average retention rates following different instructional modes (Silberman and Auerbach 2). “Practice by doing” garners a seventy-five percent retention rate, “Teaching others” earns a ninety percent retention rate, while “Lecture” earns only a five percent retention rate. It makes sense then that Holly’s cohort is learning as much as they are because the two highest retention rate activities are what Holly uses as cornerstones of her instructional approach.

#### F. Importance the individual placed on design and development compared to that literature

The design and development phase of Holly’s teaching is extensive. She spends a significant amount of time considering the learning participants need to accomplish to get to the next step of teaching their curriculum, as well as what the next step in their understanding of best practices of teaching.

Holly’s routine is to leave the teaching observations and group meetings she has with the cohort, spend time reflecting on their current understanding, and to consider where that understanding coincides with where the teachers should be by the end of the year. Holly said after she reflects on where the teachers are, she tries to articulate what the ‘next step’ needs to be for the teachers. Then, she considers the possible ways she can get that new understanding to the teachers.

The way Holly is approaching this cohort sets her apart as a teacher, and sets them apart as learners. They are really getting a customized education by one of the best teachers in the business. The gap analysis Holly conducts is followed by Holly digging into her resources to best deliver the content to her cohort. She uses a variety of student-centered learning activities and really works to vary her approach

so her participants are active and engaged. In fact, since our interviews, Holly has purchased a copy of Silberman's *Active Learning* to use as a guide.

#### G. Emphasized design aspects

Holly's first occupation is as a science teacher. In that, Holly has spent a career setting up controlled environments where her students could gain new understanding. Her adult training has much a similar feel.

Holly spends a lot of time designing the training activities her learners will engage in. The design for each training session includes some foundational research, some modelling by her, some active engagement by the participants, and a time for reflection. The aspect of design that Holly emphasizes the most, through this repeated procedure, would be what I would call a balanced approach to professional learning.

Holly tries to allow her learners to see why she is teaching them what she is, allows them opportunity to practice, then offers them the chance to consider how the learning fits with their current understanding. All of these things balance really nicely so the cohorts really feel ownership of the learning.

#### D. Comparison of real-life practice to those in literature

As stated before, Holly is a teacher. She is such an inquisitive person who wants to know best practice and prides herself on her work. It has been through her professional judgement and experience that has led Holly to be the leader that she is.

Educational researcher Kolb said, "Learning is not so much the acquisition or transmission of content as the interaction between content and experience, whereby each transforms the other" (Laird). This is something that the teacher who believes in student-centered and active learning embraces. Holly

does not believe that she is filling the buckets in her learners' heads; she truly believes that she is setting up experiences in which they can experience new things and therefore develop new knowledge and understanding.

#### Works Cited

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