

I Want One of Them. I Need One of Them!

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‘Ah wants one o’ them. Where do I git me one o’ them? Ah need one.’ I’ll never forget the sight of a very large African American woman bearing down on me like the Titanic in full sail as I stood at the front of a roomful of 1000+ teachers. I was keynoting a conference in America on Collaborative Approaches to Professional Learning and had just finished explaining the purpose of a professional coach. She was adamant that she wanted one- and I was the person to tell her where she could acquire such a beast.

Coaching is the most sophisticated form of professional learning and early attempts to introduce it to teachers in Australia were often quite disastrous. Not because the goodwill and intent wasn’t there- but because coaching sessions often became ‘advice’ or ‘critical friend’ sessions where the poor person being ‘coached’ walked away feeling as if their professional self worth had just been trampled to death.

Coaching requires a great deal of skill to be effective. Teachers, of course, do make highly effective peer coaches, provided they have been trained properly in both process and attitude. To lay yourself open to professional scrutiny is one of the most private acts you can perform as a teacher. And if that is not respected then the recipient of poor coaching will often feel violated to the point that they are reluctant to engage again for some considerable time.

Yet it is an extremely important aspect of professional growth. Despite the best intentions of personal reflection and ongoing self questioning, an individual rarely has the ability to monitor the subtleties and nuances of the impact of their verbal and non-verbal language on others. To have another pair of eyes watching for specific information can be an invaluable experience, providing the appropriate agreements have been put in place for the role of the coach, the gathering of information and data and the relaying of that information in a useful manner.

The fact that education systems are now employing very, very few external consultants should be a concern. While always seen as an ‘expendable luxury’ it is these people who have been in a position to bring alternative world viewpoints to education. Their demise means that once again means we run the risk of insular thinking and practice that simply means that education may become even more alienated from what kids need to survive and thrive outside school walls.

As one moves through the various levels of ‘teacher maturation’, from being a new graduate operating at a purely concrete survival level to a highly experienced person who has been in a state of ongoing professional growth for many years, different forms of coaching are required. For example:

Level of Professional Maturity	Major Concerns	Coaching Focus
New graduates	Activities/Behaviour	Student Engagement/ Teacher Language Support
3 rd Year Survivor	Content/Curriculum	Content/Curriculum
Older teacher who has not Engaged in ongoing professional and Self development	Motivation Managing innovation	Attitudes Curriculum
Experienced and highly motivated	Challenge and intellectual stimulation	Professional conversation triggers

Fast forward fifteen years from the African American woman to last week when I was having lunch with a friend who is in a very senior position in the public service (boy is his superannuation safe!). He was regaling me with a story about his 12 year old daughter who had been causing her parents and teachers considerable concern last year as her attention to boys had suddenly begun to outweigh her attention to learning. As, in the past, I had had considerable success in assisting in the development of methods to segregate male and female adolescent hormones for schools (through single gender classes, reverse integrating teenage boys into special school situations in order to put them on very extended work placements, and the establishment of single gender mini-schools), I suggested they consider a single gender school for her. They did, and subsequently enrolled her in a single gender public school in Victoria where she was 'doing brilliantly' ...until... 'one of her teachers decided to put her into a group with kids of lesser ability and I'm worried they will pull her down' (my friend's words, not mine). Well! Just as I was about to embark on a lecture on the virtues of (effective) collaborative learning, having introduced the practice to thousands of teachers across Australia in the 80's and 90's he continued. 'But Sienna (codename for daughter) told me in no uncertain terms what she gained through working with the other girls, as well as what she was able to help them learn- and I must admit I was a bit gob-smacked!' (a very rare experience for my friend!) Then he went on 'So I started thinking about how I could adapt this idea to my staff.' Lunch then turned into a learning session as I helped him learn how to do just that. He paid for lunch!

My own professional career has spanned a multiplicity of professional roles. Each one seen by me as an apprenticeship for the next. I deliberately sought out mentors at each stage to help me with my intended professional progression. Sometimes it was simple. A phonecall to invite a writer to lunch and ask them to talk about themselves- irresistible for most people. Other times, more formal (particularly in the business community). My mentors have ranged from other mothers to Managing Directors of multinational corporations. My coaches from sporting heroes to people with failing small businesses.

The aforementioned friend coached me in working with politicians and governments. My attitude has always been that I can learn something from each and every person I meet (including how not to do something). My current mentors, though neither are aware of it, include a first year teacher and the federal treasurer who, in very different ways, are both reminding me constantly how easy it is for people to be hurt and taken for granted!

Coaching and mentoring are crucial to ongoing healthy professional development for educators. I believe that once we stop learning we die professionally- be that after five years of teaching or fifty. And one way to maintain support, challenge, enthusiasm and passion is to incorporate regular coaching and mentoring for all educators. And the coaches and mentors should not always be other educators as that is one way to maintain exclusivity and shared ignorance.

Having had broad range of experiences across a number of levels of education, community and corporate sectors, I would highly recommend that all teachers should have a variety of experiences with others- both within and outside the education field.

*Learning buddies are a great way to enhance mutual learning with others in your own school

*Peer learning may involve others at a similar level across different schools or campuses

*Coaching may involve those at a higher level of professional maturation

*Mentoring may involve those in other fields you find intellectually or professionally stimulating.

*Mutual coaching and mentoring with those in other fields should be mandatory for all educators who have been in teaching longer than 3 years- and for all Principals and senior administrators.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Boyd's career has encompassed a deliberately broad range of professional roles. In addition to her time as a teacher (K-university), psychologist, principal, administrator, curriculum adviser, international consultant, Managing Director and CEO, she is also experienced as an author, publisher and stock market trader. Julie was recognised as Telstra Entrepreneur of the Year, Australian Innovations Award and admitted to the Australian Businesswoman's Hall of Fame. Julie has coached and mentored innumerable teachers, Principals, Leadership teams, Senior educators and others over a 30 year period. Julie is the author of many books and articles including:

Collaborative Approaches to Professional Learning and Reflection,

Creating Resilient Educators and

A Guide for Learning Facilitators(including a coaching manual)

