My View: How to Coach Others

By Lin Tucker, Coordinator of Science and Math, Benjamin Banneker Charter School, Cambridge, MA

I work as the Coordinator of Science and Math at the Benjamin Banneker Charter School in Cambridge, MA. With a dedicated math and science staff of one - me - I take on many coaching and staff development responsibilities to support the growth and development of the staff. I have held similar positions in the past but had what I now recognize as the luxury of being supported by a team of others. The relative isolation of my present position led me to crave a larger intellectual community that shared my commitment to providing high-quality coaching and staff development in their schools or districts. I wanted to learn from others how to improve my approach towards my own profession.

I found one solution from an unexpected source — a course in online coaching provided by WIDE World. My experience in the course prompted me to consider how aspects of the approach to online coach development might work locally. The course helped me understand how my work as an on-site staff developer could help build coaching and quality staff development into the culture of the school. In sum, I found a way to “grow” my own team.

During the Course

In January of 2006, I was invited to take part in a WIDE World’s coaching course. I wanted to learn how to become a more effective Teaching for Understanding (TfU) coach in my school and, perhaps eventually, to become a WIDE World TfU coach. I hoped that the online environment and the coaching focus of the course would also help me to clarify my thinking about my school-based coaching and staff development responsibilities, school-related goals, personal goals, and my need for ongoing professional support.

As the course began, I found myself in intense interaction with others online. Participants came from around the world, held many different positions, and varied in age and experience. The course dealt with how I could effectively coach others learning about the TfU Framework. Because my school had hosted an on-site WIDE World coach, I had seen a TfU coach “live” — keeping the big view of where we were headed, noticing misconceptions and gaps, highlighting
moments of particular clarity, and helping move us forward consistently with humor and understanding. I wanted to mirror her coaching persona as I developed my own.

To support “practice coaching” during the course, WIDE World provided us with a variety of coaching and assessment tools. These tools focused coaches on using collaborative, questioning methods of assessing learner’s work in web-based asynchronous (that is, not real-time) discussions. They also included specific and constructive ways to approach and respond to a learner’s online postings. The tools’ frameworks allowed me to become more comfortable and more focused on communicating with learners and facilitating their development. In these ways, they wedded the TfU approach to the online learning experience.

The idea of using online coaching tools also intrigued me. How could I use WIDE-like tools in my school? How could the design of a database-linked Gradebook help me in thinking, planning, and documenting my work with teachers? What if I could customize the Gradebook for my use and get help in using TfU to plan professional development?

As the course ended, I wondered how this newly developing skill set would translate into my ongoing practice. Could I combine the benefits of online learning and the importance of the TfU Framework in real-life situations? Did what I had learned have practical applications? Would it improve my staff development skills?

After the Course

I already see affirmative answers to these questions. Although the option remains for me to become a WIDE World online coach, at this time I wish to devote my time and energy into developing a deeper understanding of the teachers with whom I work.

Using the strategies learned in the course, I want to see the development of tools that guide subsequent planners to high quality professional development, that document the teachers’ work, and that allow for differentiation of content and coaching responsibilities.

I also wonder where and how the creation and use of rubrics fit into this vision. I think a tension exists between needing to hold colleagues to performance standards, perhaps with rubrics, and maintaining a psychologically safe environment for developing understandings and competencies.

I feel certain that other staff developers and/or coaches in schools or districts share my need for broad-based, ongoing, resource-rich professional support. What if we could belong to and get support from an online community of coaches and staff developers who all worked in face-to-face situations designing professional development for their schools? What if our community worked together online to support one another and deepen our understanding of providing high-quality staff development for a year or more at a time?

I do not have the answers to these questions yet, but I’m encouraged by my online experience. Participation in a community that shared a common language about teaching has prompted me to incorporate TfU teachings into my thoughts about staff development. I think we owe it to teachers and students to make the goals of developing our own understanding and that of our students as automatic a part of the teaching day as taking attendance or signing in.