

# The 3R's for coaching learning relationships

Jan Robertson takes us on an in-depth exploration of coaching partnerships and provides some powerful insights into effective professional practice.

The model that I developed through research and development around the coaching of educational leadership (Robertson, 2008) was originally called “Professional Partnerships.” Where the coaching relationship develops as a partnership, each person contributes to the creation of new knowledge and learning that subsequently takes place. The coach approaches the relationship as a learner and not all-knower: Sometimes teacher, sometimes learner; sometimes leader, sometimes follower; sometimes expert, sometimes novice. My research has identified that there are important 3R's (Robertson, 1997) for effective adult professional learning to take place:

- 1. Reciprocity
- 2. Relationship
- 3. Reflection-on-reality

These 3R's develop from, but then contribute to, relational trust, respect for difference and reflexivity within practice – informed, committed action. This list of 3 R's challenges many standard practices of adult learning relationships and teacher-student learning relationships in educational organisations. When asked what three

words educators might use to describe the learning relationships they experience with their colleagues or indeed, what words their students would use to describe their relationships with their teachers, few use such words as “coach, partner, mentor, guide, support, adventurer, co-researcher, co-designer” or any other words that would indicate a concept of learning through reciprocal or shared reflective relationships built on trust. Therefore, rather than the focus essentially being just on the content – the other 3R's, (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) - it is the process or practice of learning, that these 3R's underpin.

To develop teacher pedagogy or educational leadership effectiveness, to reach the students in the most challenging situations, reciprocal learning for teacher and learner, leader and follower, is essential. Where there is deep trust, there will also be a depth of reflection on the reality of the learning context.

## ■ ■ ■ Designing the conditions for leadership and learning

If leadership is viewed as the energy and expertise that takes the school from where it is, to where it wants to be, everybody in that community can contribute to that leadership, formally or informally. Leadership is also the

potential and energy within individuals that enable them to contribute effectively. It is the learning relationships and the continual interaction of those relationships that are key to effective leadership and learning. If those in formal positions of leadership (such as teachers and headteachers) only give answers, information and advice, the outcome may not be intellectual independence, creative thinking and knowledge creation by those with whom they are working. It is the leadership activities, routines and context that design and create particular leadership practice within schools (Spillane, 2008). Changing the work of leaders will impact on the subsequent interaction. For example, particular leadership actions may impact on the confidence and capacity of others to take ownership and responsibility for their professional practice or their learning. It is the response to the leadership actions where the leadership practice takes place (Spillane, 2008). Changing and challenging previously held ways of knowing and being in leadership and learning requires relational trust, reciprocity in the learning process, and reflection on the practice created. Skill development is essential to create the tools and experiences to do so.

## ■ ■ ■ Skills are necessary to the process of partnership

Communication and interpersonal skills are essential tools for working effectively with others and yet often overlooked in educators' personal, professional and leadership development. The model of coaching through partnership is built on the 3R's for learning relationships. Deep reflection on practice calls for the responsibility and ownership for the process to be with the learner; reciprocal learning necessitates a respect for the knowledge that others bring to any learning and leadership situation; and trust and continuity is essential to the learning relationship if the coach is to fully understand the learner and their context to be able to work with them effectively. It is the interaction between teaching and learning where the practice of learning takes place - these processes are integral to each other. To this end, Maori language in New Zealand, as well as other languages, only have one word for the teaching and learning process. In Maori that word is “ako” – in recognition that it is at the interaction of both teaching and learning, teacher and learner, where the practice is.

Although the skills listed in the following section may at first glance seem facile and obvious, the research and development on coaching partnerships (Robertson, 2008) has revealed again and again that leaders are challenged by the new ways of being these skills require. Many have not previously experienced reciprocal learning relationships in their professional learning.

## ■ ■ ■ Listening

The most important skill of working in learning partnership is listening. Throughout the world, at an indeterminable amount of workshops, with thousands of educators at all levels in their careers, there is the same experience over and over. Sitting and simply being present, listening to a colleague describe their practice, is not something that comes easily to educators, on either side of this practice. A first activity is to ask educators to listen to their colleague articulate and justify certain elements of their pedagogy and practice: “What do you do and why do you believe it is important? What impact does it have on students' achievement in your class or school?” At the beginning, not only do the majority of leaders find it difficult to simply listen for three minutes without asking questions, giving advice and without telling a story of their own – their partners state that the experience of telling the story of their practice without being interrupted also feels strange. This perhaps accentuates how seldom as leaders we listen to each other's professional stories in our daily professional lives. Educational leaders design times for this to occur regularly.

## ■ ■ ■ Reflective Questioning

Effective frameworks for asking questions that challenge and enable others to reflect in depth on practice are important. Good coaches are aware of the types of questions they are asking, they are able to analyse their questions, and they ask questions that delve down to the level of philosophies, values and beliefs about the leadership of learning. The partnership research model (Robertson, 2008) uses a framework of three levels: questions that clarify, questions that explore the reasons and intended outcomes for particular practice, and a third level of questions that explore the colleague's educational platform (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002).

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### ■■■ Self-assessment

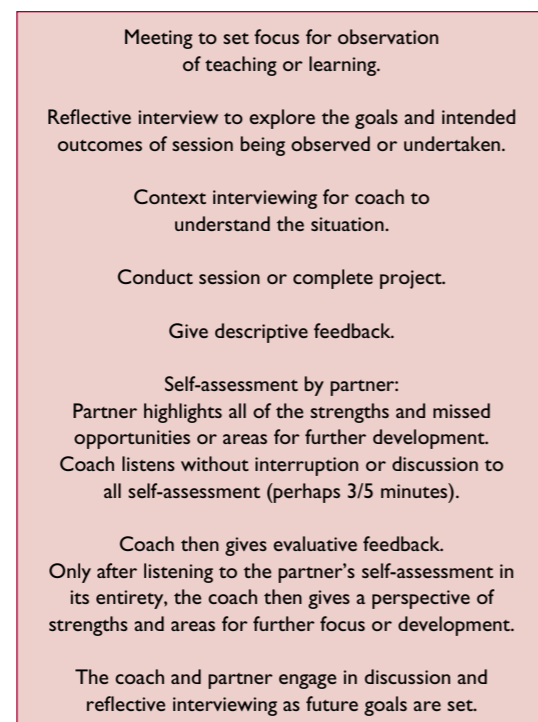
A most important skill of coaching is creating opportunities and designing the conditions for self-assessment. Often in teacher appraisal, as well as in student learning, it is 'others' who give feedback and assessment with little involvement of the learner in the self-assessment process. Much of the interaction in education is typified by someone telling another what to do, and how to do it, and then telling them how well (or not) they have done it and what they should do. This creates dependency and reliance on others to do the thinking and to take the responsibility for outcomes of the learning relationship. Good learning relationships places the control for the learning with the learner. Learning partners ask the learner what they plan to focus on, what they feel will be the facilitators and resistors to their achievement, what the expected outcomes might be, and what they would like the learning partner to focus on for the purposes of support or feedback or expertise. Learning and leadership then becomes the responsibility of the learner – and such self-regulation is important for both adults and students in their learning. (Butler, & Schnellert, 2008). This will also impact on teachers' self-efficacy - the belief that they can make a difference in their work - and students' motivation and engagement when they feel they do have something to contribute and are responsible for their own learning process.

### ■■■ Goal-setting

Goal-setting is an important part of coaching and learning relationships as new learning is about the creation of new knowledge and new ways of being. The coach as learning partner can input into this process with ideas, expertise and suggestions. Important, however, is the timing of input in this process to keep the responsibility and ownership for the learning in the learner's control. The learner must always self-assess both strength and areas for further development before the learning partner offers feedback. Exploring the context and reality of the proposed goals within the learning context, establishing whether the goals are achievable, realistic and measurable, as well as highlighting as many possible options as possible, is vital to the process. The learner then sets the priorities and establishes a timeframe and commitment to the goals set.

### ■■■ Feedback

There are conflicting views about whether feedback is essential in the learning process. Joyce and Showers (2002) have made a complete about-turn and now have taken 'feedback' out of their coaching model. If the learning processes are designed for educators to self-assess as well as to learn vicariously from observation of others' practice, feedback is not essential. However, my research has shown that in a trusting, respectful relationship, learners will willingly seek feedback from their coaches. This can be achieved in different ways. A very powerful approach to feedback is descriptive feedback – simply an account of colleague's practice or student's work that relays back to them what they have done and how and what happened, without any assessment or judgment of the process. I say "simply" but the research indicates how difficult it is for educators to give descriptive feedback without judgment (Robertson, 2008). Giving evaluative feedback – highlighting strengths and areas for further development or reflection - is also important in a learning relationships, but most important is that the learner, the partner, first self-assesses and highlights their own strengths or things that went well in a process that might go as follows:



The hardest aspect of teacher development for most educators is being able to give and receive constructive evaluative feedback. This is most often because they have not had the opportunity to learn effective skills. If they follow this process above, and use the coaching skills outlined, they will find partners not only taking responsibility for their own practice but also ownership for the improvement of their work. Partners become open to new ideas and have a willingness to try them out. Coaches will find most of the hard work has been done for them!

Imagine a school where all the educators are learning partners to their colleagues. How might they then describe the learning relationships they experience with their colleagues? My research and others (e.g. Joyce and Showers, 2002) has highlighted that if teachers/leaders are peer coaching in schools, a particular type of professional learning culture and norms develop. Even more importantly, there is also an impact on the student-teacher learning relationship.

### ■■■ Developing a coaching culture – “the way things are done around here”

Coaching, therefore, is not something that you do for one hour twice a year at review and development time or even once a month. Coaching can be the way you enter relationships – teaching, learning, and leadership relationships - and a particular organisational culture can develop when such peer-assisted support and development is prevalent in the learning practices of educators and students. My research and development has indicated that these ten principles are important underpinnings of an organisational culture built around the 3R's of reciprocity, relationship and reflection-on-reality.

**1. Inquiry** – the learning community is committed to researching their practice and seeking information from each other. In these types of schools you see teachers problematising their practice. They ask each other questions about challenges they are facing and encounter in their practice. They problem pose. They proactively search for continual improvement. They ask questions such as

- a. “What would happen if we tried ...”
- b. “What might we do differently?”
- c. “Does anyone know any research that might guide us?”
- d. “Which students are not achieving as well as others? Why not?”
- e. “Has anyone tried anything similar to this with their students?”
- f. “What is the data/evidence telling us?” (Earl & Katz, 2006)

Through this process, teachers create and share new knowledge together as part of their daily work.

You would see students supporting each other in their learning in the same ways, and encouraged by their coaching partners' reflective questioning techniques to develop critical perspectives about their work.

**2. Risk-taking and challenge** – supportive coaching environments are not soft and woolly – far from it! In strong cultures built on networks of relational trust, educators set very high standards and expectations for their own professional behaviour and that of others. Here members of the learning community try new ideas and share their successes and ideas with each other as part of their learning journey. They are open to new ideas and open to thinking about new ways of working and being. They exhibit risk-taking and experimentation (Joyce & Showers, 2002). But it will be in a cycle of reflection-on-reality. Their actions are informed by past experiences and decision-making, and the extent to which these new actions achieved the intended outcomes is subject to their own scrutiny and that of their peers. The challenge part of coaching provides the opportunities and structures to move people beyond self, across boundaries, sometimes beyond their comfort zones, to enable different perspectives and methodologies to confront existing ways of knowing. These outside perspectives, the observation of others and new ideas, enables further reflection, examination of one's own work, and the justification of, or the subsequent change of one's existing practice in the light of this reflection.

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**3. Responsibility and trust** – where there is strong relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) rich accountability and ownership for one's own learning is the outcome. In these cultures individuals take responsibility for the quality of their own work. They are critically reflective about their work; they self-assess and seek feedback in order to improve what they do. They actively identify and build on their strengths as well as highlight areas for development. They do not need to have someone else telling them what to do and how to do it, and then checking up to see whether they have done it. Giving responsibility goes hand-in-hand with the development of trust that they can and will do the job they have set out to do. Many education cultures are built on a 'deficit and dependency model' of mistrust, which leads to a lack of self-regulation, responsibility and ownership. Trust develops from trustworthy, authentic leadership practice within the learning relationships.

**4. Shared learning** – this is the mutuality of shared understanding that occurs when people enter the learning relationship as partners. Here we can see evidence of reciprocal learning between members of the school community – both inside and outside the school gates. Teachers are seen as the learners sometimes; students and parents are seen as the teachers. Coaches actively listen. Their focus is on developing awareness and understanding of their actions on another's practice. Teachers talk to each other about teaching and learning. Teachers talk to students about their learning and how they learn. Students talk to teachers about their teaching. This is a community where "listen first, in order to learn" is a valued tenet. Diversity is valued. Crossing cultural boundaries, or boundaries between communities, or nations, or theory and practice, or boundaries between teachers, and teacher and students, are seen as opportunities to learn together at the interstices of the crossing (Robertson & Webber, 2002).

**5. Support** – this is the commitment to the ethic of care. Cultures built on a web of strong learning partnerships are made up of people who care about each other, acknowledge

each other, and support each other. They see the person in the professional and the person in the learner. They care about the holistic wellness of colleagues and students. Academic achievement is not the only valued outcome of people in this community. This is a community in the highest sense – where people know each other, look out for each other, and help each other to achieve their goals and aspirations. Support is seen in the commitment to initiatives and others' goals – where a sense of being part of something bigger than oneself is the important endeavour. Support is also about having some fun and laughter and a general sense of collegiality and friendship because supportive, caring people know the importance of renewal, revitalisation and blend in their personal and professional lives.

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**6. Building capacity** – in oneself, others and the organisation. People in a learning community know that this process begins with oneself. It requires taking responsibility for one's own development and seeking opportunities for renewal and improvement. Intellectual capacity building is not enough – and social, cultural, emotional and spiritual capital, are all important elements of the capacity-building process. These partnership communities are rich in leadership capacity. There is a shared understanding that interdependence is more powerful than independence. Synergy is created through working with and through others. People look for situations to create opportunities for others to lead, to excel, to develop. Developing leadership in others is their most important work. Community members are led by the shared vision and they contribute towards the future they have helped develop.

**7. Quality** – the highest standards and expectations developed through vision and values. In cultures rich in risk-taking and challenge, only the best will do for the educators. They hold 100% to the maxim that "every one can learn" and they believe it! They constantly struggle with the dilemmas and tensions that are inevitable in this learning challenge and they are life-long learners in their search for further improvement and achievement (Sutton,

2005). The focus is on value-added practice and students' achievement across many dimensions. The individual learner is the number one priority and the starting point for decision-making. Students and community members are involved in the decision-making processes. They uphold the moral purpose of education.

**8. Innovation and improvement** – people in these communities value innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. They look for and find new ways of working to improve their practice and learning. They are the educators who question and critique policy, systems and practice. They are the teachers who think 'big picture' and bring about the type of sustained change that will have a positive impact on students' learning. Students are creative in their approaches to their work – and their coaching partners, (their teachers), value different ways of understanding and achieving results.

**9. Critical reflection, thinking, and awareness** - this requires outside perspectives and feedback through coaching relationships. In these relationship-rich communities, time is prioritised for critical reflection focusing on policies, values, beliefs and principles. This helps lessen the gap between espoused theories-of-practice and theories-in-action (Schon, 1987). This moves all learners into double-loop and triple-loop learning (Argyris, 1976) where they not only question whether what they are doing is effective, but they also question whether they should be doing it all. They become thinkers again! They query and challenge. They ask what perspective something is written from, or debate the authenticity of curriculum, or the priorities established. They aren't called radicals or

regarded as precocious – but are seen as thinking, aware, critically reflective members of the community. This is an accepted and valued part of the culture, in classrooms and in staffrooms.

**10. Belief** – in oneself, in others, and in possibilities. Self-efficacy and self-confidence is one of the most powerful determiners of one's ability to learn and to feel that one can make a positive difference in his or her work and life. Believing in others engenders others' beliefs in themselves. Some people see the glass as half-empty or their colleagues and students as part of the problem. In partnership schools, people see the glass half-full and the potential in others to flourish. Students believe they can learn – and the adults they work with believe that they can too!

Coaching partnerships then, is much more than a one-hour session here and there within an organisation. It can influence the whole learning culture of an organisation and when it is has, it would be very easy for an anthropologist to study what this organisation and community believes about how learning most effectively takes place. It will be seen in staff meetings and in professional development sessions. It will be seen in classrooms and playgrounds. It will be seen in the outside community spaces and between other places of learning in the community. It will be seen in interactions with parents. Students will know it, teachers will experience it, and it really will be that "partnership is the way we do things here" – building strong trusting relationships, designing reflection-on-reality of practice, and reciprocity in the practice of learning – all learning; a professional learning community (Stoll & Bolam, 2005). The 3R's for teachers' practice place the lens firmly on the process through coaching learning relationships.

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