Coaching and Mentoring in Adult Basic Education

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CHAPTER 16

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ABSTRACT

Adult basic education teachers come to the profession with little formal training in working with adult learners, and many have no paid preparation time, limited instructional resources and access to professional development, and little contact with other ABE teachers. Multiple mentoring and coaching models have recently been developed to meet ABE practitioner needs. The authors describe three unique projects that took place in the Massachusetts, Ohio, and Minnesota adult basic education systems, utilizing mentoring and coaching for professional learning. Massachusetts teachers participated in mentor teacher groups and reported more change than teachers in other types of professional learning situations. They also valued opportunities for one-to-one observation and feedback from the mentor. The Ohio model of peer coaching emphasized a relationship between peers that is collaborative, nonevaluative, reciprocal, and grounded in the process of cognitive coaching and the idea of gradual release of responsibility. In Minnesota, the state professional development system and its university partner launched a peer coaching project for partner teachers that incorporates aspects of action research and multiple rounds of observations and reflection. The chapter includes suggestions for good practice and further research into the effectiveness of mentoring and coaching as an approach to providing adult basic education teachers with high-quality professional development.
INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you are a teacher who has been hired to teach a population of students with whom you’ve never worked, and that you did not receive any formal and/or preservice training in how to work with these students. Instead, you were given several student workbooks and told to use those as a guide. In addition, you are hired to teach part-time—usually several nights a week—with no paid preparation time; you have limited access to professional development or even to a supervisor who can come to observe your class, and have little contact with other teachers.

This is the situation in which many adult basic education (ABE) teachers find themselves. Under such conditions, having a mentor or a coach can be transformational. The advice, feedback, and support of a coach or mentor can offer the promise of validation that one is “doing the right thing.” Such a guide can help a teacher understand the specific population of students and even challenge a novice teacher’s unexamined assumptions about what works and does not work with adults who have low or less-than-functional basic literacy or English-speaking skills.

As a contribution to understanding the potential role of mentoring and coaching in a field very different from K–12 or postsecondary education, we describe three different initiatives to help adult basic education teachers learn their craft with the help of a mentor or coach. Our goal here is not to describe whether or how mentoring or coaching works for teachers with different needs (e.g., those who lack content vs. pedagogical skills), but to present the potential of mentoring/coaching as an alternative form of professional development for a diverse group of teachers, some of whom may not be well served by traditional workshops. We start by briefly describing the adult basic education system and the challenges it presents for providing teachers with evidence-based, effective professional development. We then provide brief profiles of projects in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Minnesota to organize mentoring and coaching for adult basic education teachers, each project with unique features tailored to the specific needs of this population of teachers. Finally, we summarize our suggestions for good practice and further research into the effectiveness of mentoring.

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ABE SYSTEM

The ABE system in the United States is designed to provide education to adults functioning below the 12th-grade level in any of the basic academic areas, including reading, mathematics, and writing. ABE English-language instruction is also provided for adult immigrants and refugees, sometimes in combination with basic skills instruction. ABE is delivered at a variety of sites, with variations across and within states: public schools, workforce centers, community/technical colleges, prisons, jails, libraries, learning centers, tribal centers, and community-based or-
ganizations. System structure within states is equally varied: ABE may be part of the K–12 education system, a postsecondary system, or even a state department of labor system, and certification and preservice preparation for teachers is not uniform (Smith & Gomez, 2011). Adult basic education, unlike K–12, is largely funded with federal or state year-to-year “soft money” funding that keeps the ABE system staffed by part-time or volunteer teachers with little background in teaching adults and working in poorly paid, non-benefitted jobs without preparation time. Unlike K–12 teachers, ABE teachers often work in isolation, teach part-time in evening or weekend programs, and receive no paid time to participate in professional development activities (Smith, 2006). Lacking stable funding from a tax or tuition base, ABE programs and state systems operate via annual allocations from federal and state legislatures, and thus lack resources to invest in extensive professional development. The overwhelmingly part-time workforce has limited time to attend the brief workshops or conferences that are offered. All of this presents unique challenges to providing high-quality professional development for ABE practitioners. These challenges result from the structural, policy, and funding constraints not typically faced by the K–12 or higher education system.

The need for professional development and learning opportunities is critical because teachers often come into ABE classrooms with limited experience, formal training, or theoretical background in working with adult learners (Smith & Hofer, 2003). Certification specifically in teaching adults is not required in many states (Smith & Gomez, 2011). In Minnesota, for example, while approximately 80% of ABE teachers hold current teaching licenses, only 20% of those licenses are in adult basic education; 22% of licensed ABE teachers hold elementary teaching licenses. In addition, Minnesota expects a turnover of approximately one-third of ABE teachers within the next few years (Marchwick, 2010). These statistics point to a critical and ongoing need for professional learning opportunities focused on how to teach adults.

Providing high-quality professional development is challenging with limited resources, particularly because research indicates that the best professional development takes time, careful design and follow-up, collective participation, and a strong link to program efforts to improve instruction. Reviewing both the K–12 and ABE research on features of effective professional development, Smith and Gillespie (2007) argue that both traditional and job-embedded professional development should reflect the following characteristics:

- be of longer duration
- make a strong connection between what is learned in the professional development and the teacher’s own work context
- focus on subject-matter knowledge
- encourage teachers from the same workplace to participate together
- focus on helping teachers to study their students’ thinking, not just try new techniques
include collaborative learning activities among teachers
include activities in which teachers make use of student performance data
enlist facilitators to organize job-embedded professional development
link professional development to curriculum based on standards
help program/school leaders to support instructional reform, not just accountability (Smith & Gillespie, 2007, pp. 216–221)

These best practices in professional development can be difficult to enact because of the specific constraints inherent in the ABE system. Attending professional development for multiple sessions over time is difficult when teachers/tutors are part-time or volunteer, without funding to attend professional development (Smith, 2006), factors that also lessen the possibility of teachers from the same program attending together. A focus on subject-matter knowledge in any single professional development activity is difficult to achieve when ABE teachers often teach multiple subjects, such as reading, writing, numeracy, science, and social studies, to low-level readers and to adults preparing for their General Educational Development (GED) test. In addition, working in jobs without benefits, without paid prep time, without a strong voice in program decision making, and without regular contact with colleagues (Smith & Hofer, 2003) results in higher attrition from the field (Smith, 2006). Lack of such resources is also a barrier in helping teachers to make a strong connection between the professional development and their workplace context.

How can the ABE field reconcile the need for professional learning with the realities of teacher isolation and limited access to extensive professional development activities? Research in K–12 education (Bush, 1984) indicates that when teachers participate in standard inservice models (e.g., part/single-day workshops or after-school professional development sessions), fewer than 20% apply their learning back in the classroom. However, when coaching is added to the professional development process, classroom implementation of learned strategies increases to 90% (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987). Since the goal of professional development is to have a positive impact on teaching and learning, expanded opportunities for coaching or mentoring hold promise.

MODELS OF COACHING AND MENTORING IN ABE

Just as there are huge differences in state and program structures, facilities, and resources for training and professional development within ABE, multiple mentoring and coaching models have recently been developed to meet practitioner needs. In the field of ABE, interest in peer coaching and mentoring has been growing in the past decade. Sherman, Voight, Tibbetts, Dobbins, Evans, and Weidler (2000) created a guide for integration of mentoring programs that utilizes a “master/novice” model, designed to “nurture the growth of a less experienced instructor or administrator through counseling, coaching, and supporting reflective problem solving” (p. 1). The U.S. Department of State has produced videos that model a
peer observation process for teachers of adult English language learners (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of English Language Programs, n.d.). Additionally, some states, including Ohio (Reynolds, 2007) and Minnesota (Johnson, 2012), have begun integrating variations of coaching into work with ABE and adult English language teachers.

Typically, mentoring involves an intentional relationship for the purposes of learning and growth between a more experienced professional and one who is less experienced. In this chapter, we present three variations on this one-on-one expert/novice mentoring model and the modifications that have made them viable in different ABE contexts. One variation includes guidance by a more experienced practitioner but expands on this model by teaming a single “mentor teacher” with a small group of less-experienced teachers. Another variation is here referred to as coaching. While coaching, like most traditional mentoring models, can involve an expert/novice relationship, coaching, in this context, differs from mentoring in that coaching emphasizes a mutual learning opportunity with a focus on inquiry to guide reflection and changes in practice. Thus, peer coaching can facilitate reflection and change between even very experienced veteran teachers or administrators. There are many terms associated with mentoring or coaching, including peer coaching (Hutson & Weaver, 2008; Swafford, 1998), peer mentoring (Johnson, 2012; Parrish, 2004), and reciprocal peer coaching (Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhus, 2007), and many are used interchangeably. We three authors operate within different contexts that use various terms. In this chapter, we use both terms, mentoring and peer coaching.

Peer coaching, as we define it here, is a mutual learning opportunity that builds on principles of self-directed learning and inquiry into teaching. Teachers benefit from the chance to ask questions about their own teaching, assess and critically reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, and then experience and construct meaning from experiences within a particular context. Teachers set their own goals and plans to achieve those goals (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Peer coaching is a form of professional inquiry in which teachers work with colleagues to examine, reflect upon, and alter instructional practices. Robbins (1995, as cited in Rhodes & Beneicke, 2006) defined peer coaching as “a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect upon current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; conduct action research; teach one another; or problem solve within the workplace” (p. 298).

Models of peer coaching and mentoring in ABE vary in structure, scope, and time span, although all incorporate what we know to be effective in teacher professional development: They take place over a period of time, focus on content that is relevant to participating teachers, and feature experiential and collaborative activities. The following section describes the structure and unique features of three models of coaching and mentoring in ABE: mentor teacher groups in New England and New Mexico, coaching models in Ohio, and peer coaching integrated into professional development for adult numeracy teachers in Minnesota.
Mentor Teacher Groups in New England and New Mexico

The benefits of teachers mentoring or peer coaching other teachers are well documented in the professional development literature (Danielson, 1999; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). However, there are two limitations to mentoring as a professional development approach for those responsible for planning ABE professional development, who usually work at the state level (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001). First, mentoring requires an affinity between mentor and mentee that is difficult to set up deliberately as part of a professional development system; second, mentoring is usually a one-to-one relationship, which limits the numbers of teachers who can participate in mentoring, compared to other professional development approaches, such as workshops or teacher learning circles.

In the early 2000s, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) sponsored a mixed-method study of how teachers change as a result of participating in one of three models of professional development. When we (Smith, Hofer, Solomon, Gillespie, & Rowe, 2003) initiated this four-year study, the aim was to compare three different approaches: (1) training workshops, (2) practitioner research groups, and (3) peer coaching. However, the limitations of one-on-one peer coaching or mentoring gave us pause. How could we organize peer coaching or mentoring from the “outside” in a manner that would be as effective as peers or mentors who find each other naturally; and could we justify researching an approach that promised to serve so few teachers, when the need for teacher preparation in adult basic education was so marked (Smith & Hofer, 2003)? After much thought, we came up with the idea of a mentor teacher group, an 18-hour professional development approach offering both the benefits of mentoring and the benefits of a number of teachers working together in a group. This approach combines the teacher study group with mentor observation and coaching for individual teachers. The list below outlines how a mentor teacher group works:

- The professional development organizers find an experienced ABE teacher and train her/him in how to facilitate a mentor teacher group (MTG) on a particular topic of need among teachers (e.g., working with learning disabled adults, teaching low-level math or reading, helping adults set goals for their learning, etc.).
- The organizers advertise the professional development opportunity and recruit five interested teachers to participate in the MTG.
- The group—one facilitator and five participant teachers—meet together for their first three-hour session, introducing themselves, discussing their current knowledge of the topic, and learning about what will happen during the MTG, including the readings they will do before the next session.
- Several weeks later, the group meets a second time in another three-hour session, discussing the readings and the topic, and preparing for the first mentor teacher observation.
During the two months after the second group meeting, the mentor teacher visits and observes one class of each of the five teachers, as scheduled with the participants, and conducts with each teacher a one-hour pre-observation discussion (“What should I look for as I observe your class?”), the two-hour class observation, and then a one-hour post-observation discussion (“How did you feel the new technique or strategy worked?” and “Here are the data I collected about what you asked me to observe”).

After the mentor teacher has visited and observed a class session with each of the five teachers, the whole group meets for a third time for a two-hour session; the teachers talk about the experience of being observed, and they plan for their next observation with the mentor teacher.

After the third meeting, there is a second round of mentor teacher observations in each teacher’s class.

Finally, the whole group meets for the fourth and final time for two hours, discussing what they have learned on the topic and making action plans for continuing to try new techniques or approaches in their classrooms.

In the study that tested these three models of professional development, each mentor teacher group met for 10 hours as a group; each participant teacher got eight contact hours one-on-one with the mentor, and the whole experience occurred over a four- to six-month time span. Thus, a MTG allows for a small group of teachers to learn about a topic and share plans about how to change their teaching. It also allows each teacher to be observed twice by the mentor teacher, receiving suggestions and advice about using new techniques related to the topic in their classrooms.

How effective is the mentor teacher group, as compared with other professional development approaches, in promoting teacher change? The NCSALL researchers followed 101 adult literacy teachers across New England who participated in 18 hours of professional development in either a three-day workshop, a mentor teacher group, or a practitioner research group. Teachers completed questionnaires before, immediately after, and one year after participating. They were questioned about their learning on and off the topic of professional development, and about the actions they took in their classrooms, programs, and in the field of adult literacy. Researchers also randomly selected six teachers from each of the three models, for a subsample of 18 teachers who were interviewed in depth at each of the same three points of time. Through these data, researchers were able to categorize the overall amount of change (thinking and acting) each teacher demonstrated, as well as the type of change: (1) more changes in thinking (i.e., learned new knowledge but took no or little action), (2) more changes in action (i.e., used a new technique in their classroom unrelated to the topic of the professional development and without a good explanation of why they were using the technique, other than that they thought it was an “interesting” technique), or (3) integrated change (i.e., a change in both thinking and acting where new learning
was tied to using a new technique, and the practitioner could also reflect on the use and outcome of the technique related to the topic of the professional development. Types 1 and 2 (more thinking than acting, more acting than thinking change) were categorized as “nonintegrated” change, with integrated change being the preferred type of change.

While the findings showed no statistically significant differences between the three models in terms of the amount and type of change teachers reported immediately after and one year after participating in the professional development, teachers who participated in mentor teacher groups did demonstrate more overall change than their counterparts who participated in a multisession workshop of the same length and on the same topic. In addition, a slightly higher percentage of teachers who participated in the mentor teacher group model demonstrated integrated change: 29% of mentor teacher group completers \((n = 24)\) versus 25% of practitioner research group completers \((n = 24)\), as compared to 20% of workshop participants \((n = 35)\), demonstrated integrated change. Again, these differences in change according to professional development model were not statistically significant but have implications for future research:

The subtle differences we found among the models—that teachers completing practitioner research group professional development showed slightly higher overall change, and that teachers completing mentor teacher group professional development were slightly more likely to demonstrate integrated change—might have been stronger with a larger sample. (Smith et al., 2003, p. 32)

Feedback from teachers indicated that those who participated in mentor teacher groups particularly valued the two opportunities for one-to-one observation and feedback from the mentor. Teachers may appreciate such in-class observations and coaching from a mentor because many new teachers in ABE do not, as a rule, receive direct feedback and observation on their teaching, as the following two comments demonstrate.

One teacher expressed her feelings this way:

I never feel confident in what I’m doing even though other people will say, “Oh, she’s a great teacher.” They’ve never seen me teach; no one’s ever come in and watched. How do they know? (Smith & Hofer, 2003, p. 105)

Another teacher in Smith and Hofer’s (2003) study explained the appeal of being observed and given feedback by a mentor: “We’re on our own.... There’s no support. Maybe that’s why I gravitated towards mentoring. I was so desperate for some kind of feedback! Am I doing a good job?” (p. 105).

When asked what type of professional development they would most prefer, one out of five participants (21%) in the NCSALL professional development study \((n = 87)\) said they would prefer to learn from or be coached or mentored by an experienced practitioner or professional developer who comes to their program to provide technical assistance (Smith & Hofer, 2003).
Based on these results and the relative success of the model, one of the research team members, research coordinator Judy Hofer, planned and organized five mentor teacher groups in 2002 in New Mexico on the topic of Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, adapted for adult basic education classrooms. Hofer (2004) concluded that the model’s nonhierarchical and flexible form contributes to its effectiveness:

The strength of this model is that it offers participants the opportunity to learn not only from the mentor teacher during the classroom observations but also from one another during the group meetings.... The strength of the individualized mentoring process is that it supports teachers in integrating their learning directly and immediately into their own unique contexts. The group component supports teachers by giving them the opportunity to share ideas with their colleagues. (p. 6)

**Peer Coaching in Ohio ABE**

In 2006, as a response to increasing demand from teachers and program administrators for support in how to serve adults with (undiagnosed) learning disabilities, the Ohio ABE system piloted a peer coaching model of professional development specific to providing support for teachers working with adults with special learning needs (Reynolds, 2007). As with the Minnesota model, the Ohio model of peer coaching emphasizes a relationship between peers that is collaborative, nonevaluative, reciprocal, and focused on learners and learning (Johnson, 2012; Parrish, 2004). The Ohio model was grounded in the process of cognitive coaching and the idea of gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), which, as with scaffolded instruction, allows for increasing autonomy on the part of the mentee or individual being coached. Pearson and Gallagher’s model includes four progressive steps: (1) “I do, you watch,” in which the coach teaches, and the teacher observes, with the coach planning and leading the debriefing session after the observation; (2) “I do, you help,” in which the coach teaches, the teacher assists, and both plan the debrief; (3) “You do, I help,” in which the teacher teaches and the coach assists, both planning the debrief; and (4) “You do, I watch,” in which the teacher teaches, the coach observes, and the teacher plans and leads the debrief session. The process we employed used three basic steps: a planning conference, observation, and reflecting conference (Costa & Garmston, 1994). During the planning conference, which occurs right before the lesson, coaches work with teachers to (1) build trust, (2) focus on the teacher’s goals, (3) facilitate a mental rehearsal of the lesson, (4) set parameters for the reflecting conference, and (5) promote self-coaching. During observation, the coach collects the data (e.g., student interaction, level of questions asked) identified by the teacher. The coach can utilize a variety of means to gather data during observation, including videotaping, tallying student actions, and classroom mapping of teacher movement or teacher–student interactions. After the lesson, the coach and teacher meet for the reflecting conference. In the reflecting conference, the
coach encourages the teacher to reflect on the lesson, giving his/her impression, supported with specific examples.

As the designers of this coaching model, we felt it important that participants understand the distinction between coaching, mentoring, and evaluation (see, e.g., Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 14). The primary goal of coaching is—through reflective practice—to help teachers develop their craft. Evaluation and feedback play an important role in teacher professional development, and we felt it was necessary to make a clear distinction between them. Coaches restate, reflect, and question; they do not offer judgments (positive or negative). To do so would limit the ability of the teacher to reflect on her own practice and would detract from the trusting relationship that is required for deep reflection to occur.

Because peer coaching was a new model of professional learning in Ohio ABLE, the two state leadership professional development staff members assigned to coordinate the initiative developed a protocol and training resources to prepare participants to engage in the peer coaching process. This preparation included a two-day, face-to-face skills workshop on coaching, with extensive training in the questioning and reflection techniques applied in peer coaching relationships. The designers also developed and maintained a website with additional training and support materials, including an online tutorial designed to make clear the differences between coaching, mentoring, and evaluation. Overall, the training was intended to help participants to do the following:

- use coaching as a tool to enhance ongoing professional dialogue that develops self-efficacy and produces high-impact teaching and learning
- define the coaching process, roles, and ABLE coaching model (including the “gradual release of responsibility” model by Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)
- differentiate between peer coaching and mentoring and peer coaching and evaluating
- reflect on the Five States of Mind (Costa & Garmston, 1994) to design questions that mediate thinking and behavior, then practice paraphrasing and questioning techniques
- create coaching framework maps to use with coaching conversations
- practice effective interpersonal communication skills (listening, trust and relationship-building strategies)
- reflect on personal coaching strengths and challenges
- network with the coordinator and other coaches regularly through website and electronic lists
- complete a practice coaching session

Twelve ABE instructors from across the state participated in this face-to-face and online training; this pool of coaches was then available to interested ABE teachers who might want a coach. Those who did participate in coaching provided very positive feedback; indeed, the experience was positive for both parties. Yet, over the course of the initiative and despite sustained promotion, few instructors
(n < 10) or administrators (n < 10) took advantage of the peer coaching program. Of note, we offered teachers and administrators a traditional workshop session on the techniques of coaching (e.g., questioning skills, such as probing and clarifying and using positive presuppositions) outside the peer coaching initiative as a way to educate program staff about peer coaching; the rooms were full and evaluations were positive. We were unable to determine the reasons for the general lack of participation, but lack of understanding of the peer coaching process and/or lack of time could have been factors. Establishing and sustaining a coaching program is challenging at the K–12 level (Neufeld & Roper, 2003), and perhaps even more so in the ABE system, where programs and teachers are isolated. As a result of the lack of participation after the first year, focus on this pilot peer coaching program was shifted as other initiatives took priority.

In 2011 through 2012, we implemented a modified version of this peer coaching model as part of a statewide professional development program in mathematics. Instead of having a pool of coaches for teachers to call upon, ABE program directors who wanted to participate in this new pilot were asked to select two or more instructors from their program. The teams of teachers selected from each participating program were expected to work together throughout the pilot program. We employed the same coaching process as in the earlier peer coaching pilot (i.e., planning conference, observation, reflecting conference) and provided training on observation techniques. Over the course of the year, each team of teachers was expected to complete two formal coaching sessions encompassing all three steps, including structured classroom observations of each other, using the following questions to guide pre- and post-observation conferencing:

**Planning Conference Questions**

1. What are your goals for the students?
   a. How will you know the students have reached these goals?
   b. What will you do to help your students reach the goals?
   c. What will you do for those students who do not reach the intended goals?
2. What data would you like me to collect about your students and/or yourself?
3. How has this conversation helped you?

**Post-observation Questions**

1. How do you feel your lesson went?
2. What went well? How do you know?
3. What did you see or hear that would indicate that the students achieved the goals?
4. What might you change or do differently?
5. How has this conversation helped you?
In addition, the participating program directors \((n = 6)\) were required to participate in a study circle, designed to promote awareness of relevant research in math, so that the teachers participating in peer coaching would have administrative support within their program to try new instructional strategies in math.

Feedback from the pilot was mixed. Some teacher teams felt that the process, particularly the observations, was too highly structured. The questions, which were provided to protect the integrity of the coaching conversation, and the structured observation techniques seemed to limit the teachers in a way that made them uncomfortable. Teachers reported that they preferred to meet and talk informally about their teaching. As a result, many teams resisted the formal process and “just talked.”

When reflecting on this feedback from participating teachers, we heard not only their desire for peer support but also a clear resistance to the formality and structure we had built into the process. We used this feedback to make some adjustments to our process the following year (2012–2013). In the second year of the statewide math professional development initiative, we again asked for teams of teachers who could provide support throughout the program year; this time, however, we focused more on the conferencing aspect of coaching, going back to the questioning and feedback techniques of cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994). Thus, the design of this peer coaching professional development model continues to evolve, building on the desire of teachers to share their practice through conversation and coaching conferences that help teachers develop what Costa and Garmston (1994) referred to as craftsmanship: “The drive for elaboration, clarity, refinement, precision—craftsmanship—is the energy source from which persons ceaselessly learn and deepen their knowledge and skills” (p. 137).

Peer Coaching and the Minnesota Numeracy Initiative

In 2008, the Adult Basic Education Teaching and Learning Advancement System (ATLAS), the Minnesota professional development center housed at Hamline University, launched a peer coaching project for partner teachers that incorporates aspects of action research and multiple rounds of observations and reflection (termed “peer mentoring” and adapted from Parrish, 2004). This peer coaching model intentionally moves away from the master/novice pairing and emphasizes a relationship between colleagues that is collaborative, nonevaluative, reciprocal, and focused on learners and learning (Johnson, 2012; Parrish, 2004). To facilitate reflection on current practice, ATLAS peer coaching integrates a process of self-assessment with reflection on ideas about teaching and learning and encourages professional conversations with a colleague to facilitate teachers’ insights into their own beliefs and classroom decision making and the impact those choices have on learning (Danielson, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 1996). We encourage peers to focus on student learning, based on the belief that, with such a focus, peer coaching can lead to changes in teacher practices and ultimately to improved student outcomes (Joyce & Showers, 2003; Zwart et al., 2007).
Peer coaching through ATLAS is offered as a professional development option for practitioners who can now access an online training at any time to begin the process; unfortunately, this has had very limited success. Despite aggressive marketing and the very positive impact reported by past participants, few teachers seem willing or able to take the time required in this model, which includes training time, multiple observations, and pre- and post-observation meetings.

In 2010, we launched a new professional development project for teachers of math, called the Minnesota Numeracy Initiative (MNI), with the goal of improving numeracy instruction and implementation of new instructional practices for participating teachers. Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) reviewed implementation practice studies and found that changes in practice are best facilitated through introduction of skills through training, followed by on-the-job learning with the support of a consultant or coach. Thus, we drew from our experiences with past peer coaching and this awareness of the power of support to integrate a new peer coaching model into MNI.

MNI is a professional development activity designed to meet the needs of a cohort of approximately 24 ABE or adult English-language teachers who teach numeracy at any level each year. MNI has multiple components: two face-to-face meetings, two online courses about adult numeracy instruction offered through World Education (professionalstudiesae.worlded.org), an electronic community of practice (using Wiggio; more at www.wiggio.com), and peer coaching activities. These components are organized into three phases, as outlined in Table 16.1.

The vision of MNI peer coaching is broad, and includes work and support with a colleague throughout the year. Peer activities during Phases 1 and 3 include the following:

1. participation with the partner in training and support activities at the kick-off meeting

### Table 16.1: The Structure of the Minnesota Numeracy Initiative

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August–December</td>
<td>December–February</td>
<td>February–April</td>
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<tr>
<td>• full-day, face-to-face, kick-off meeting</td>
<td>• partner observations</td>
<td>• online course 2 (Teaching Reasoning and Problem-Solving Strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• online course 1 (Foundations of Teaching Adult Numeracy)</td>
<td>• ongoing participation in MNI Wiggio</td>
<td>• weekly partner meetings</td>
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<td>• weekly partner meetings</td>
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<td>• partner project</td>
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<td>• webinar at the end of online course</td>
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<td>• project presentation at final full-day, face-to-face meeting</td>
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<td>• ongoing participation in MNI Wiggio</td>
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<td>• ongoing participation in MNI Wiggio</td>
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2. weekly partner meetings through fall and spring online courses to reflect on course content and course assignments, including implementation of instructional strategies

3. submission of weekly email “notecards” with questions or highlights of the partner meetings to a designated MNI project lead

4. the creation and presentation of culminating partner projects for the final meeting

However, the heart of MNI peer coaching is a partner observation process that occurs during Phase 2. This activity facilitates and promotes the use of newly learned strategies into instruction with peer support. We have identified six critical steps needed for the peer coaching experience to result in the reflection and instructional changes desired.

**Preparation and Training**

Teachers are encouraged to apply to MNI with a partner, although we have been mostly successful at pairing teachers who may not know each other at the start. Whether teachers apply together or not, like all adult learners, they benefit from a clear understanding of purpose and expectations, so training and team building are critical. We spend time emphasizing the nonevaluative nature of peer coaching and the process of using a structured protocol for observation and discussion. And, no matter how comfortable partners may be with each other, we integrate activities on communication styles and nonjudgmental listening and provide opportunities for partners to talk about how they feel about being observed. It has also been very helpful to do the observations after partners have worked together through an online course and weekly meetings, allowing them a chance to build rapport and a level of comfort with each other.

**Teacher Self-Assessment and Identifying an Area for Exploration**

A distinguishing feature of the MNI peer-coaching model is the use of a tool provided to teachers for self-assessment and reflection, added as an important step prior to a pre-observation discussion. Working with national numeracy colleagues, we created an Effective Numeracy Teaching Self-Assessment (http://atlasabe.org/literature_112172/MNI_Overview_and_Design) that builds on the principles of effective numeracy instruction that MNI teachers have learned about in the first online course. The self-assessment tool includes places for teachers to assess the frequency with which they integrate key numeracy instructional practices in instruction (“0” as never to “5” as always), and also to list actual teaching activities they believe might exemplify that practice.

Use of the self-assessment tool gives teachers a rubric and destination (What am I aiming for?), as well as a chance to affirm what they are doing well and gain insight into what they may not be doing so well. After completing the self-assessment, teachers are asked to reflect on their responses, identify their own strengths...
and weaknesses, and select a particular area that they would like to explore more fully in their teaching. Once teachers have thought about their classroom and selected an area for exploration, the peers meet together for the pre-observation discussion.

**Pre-observation Discussions and Observation Tasks**

Partners set up a time to meet to share and discuss the self-assessment, specifically talking through what they would like to improve or modify in their teaching. Partners can brainstorm activities or practices to better integrate the instructional practice each has identified as a personal challenge or area to explore. In addition, individuals decide with their partner what the observing partner will look for in the class and what kind of notes would be most helpful. Preparation for this step should include practice with the structured process of narrowing from goal to observation task, which can be challenging for some. Observations like this are different from the evaluative checklist of teaching practices that many teachers may have experienced with supervisors, so this preparation should not be overlooked.

**Observations**

The purpose of the observations is key: *Keep the focus on learners and learning.* The purpose of observations for these peer coaches is not to judge teacher performance and give feedback on what the teacher is or is not doing well. Rather, the peer coach is there to observe the students’ reactions, engagement with activities and strategies, and evidence of learning. During the observation, the peer coach collects evidence and insights for the teacher. Peers may observe for varying lengths of time, but most observations last from 30 to 60 minutes. Observers should take notes and can participate in the classroom activities or not, as determined by the partners. Either way, the focus of the observation should be on learners and connected to the teacher-defined goals from the pre-observation meeting.

**Post-observation Discussion, Reflection, and Next Steps**

Soon after the observation, teachers meet to talk together about what was observed, what it means for learning and teaching, and natural next steps. We recommend a process in which the teacher shares how s/he felt about what happened in class with the new strategy or activity, and then the observer shares what s/he observed, specifically, discussing the students’ learning and reactions to the instructional strategies or activities tried. Together, partners consider such questions as these:

- What seemed to work well? When did learning seem to happen?
- How would you tweak this strategy or activity for next time?
- How do you want to continue integrating this instructional practice into your teaching?
If the teacher feels that her goal was not met, then the two can brainstorm strategies and additional ideas to meet goals. This process may lead back into a second cycle, when the peer once again observes the colleague. Although we only require one observation each for MNI, two to three cycles of feedback and observations with the peer coach would provide more opportunity for peers to refine and incorporate new ideas to meet their goals.

**Final Reflection**

At the end of the observation and reflection cycle, the teachers revisit their initial self-assessments and complete the self-assessment again. This allows teachers to chart their own growth and affirm what goals have been met and/or what else they would like to explore in their teaching. Following a process of observing and being observed, this final meeting can be a powerful reminder of the value of collaborative work and a reinvigorating affirmation of what is going well and what has had a positive impact on learners and learning. MNI was piloted in 2010 through 2011 with 24 teachers and ran a second cohort of 22 teachers in 2011 through 2012. To determine whether we had met our project objectives, including teacher implementation of effective adult numeracy instructional strategies, we brought in an external evaluator during the pilot year to analyze data collected through pre- and post-MNI year questionnaires, weekly note cards, discussion posts in the courses and through the Wiggio, as well as teacher self-assessments and final reflections. The analysis by Waldron (2011) provided confirmation that MNI participants did indeed implement effective and more varied adult numeracy instructional strategies in their classrooms as a result of participation in MNI and that the peer coaching component was valuable because of the opportunities it provided for feedback on teaching in addition to the self-assessment of teaching strengths and needs.

A challenge has been the need to manage the logistics of required activities, such as the partner observations, for teachers who may not work in the same program and who may be spread across a wide geographic area, a situation common in ABE. This has required flexibility with the weekly meetings; if teachers cannot meet in person, we require them to speak to each other over the phone. For ABE teachers who may need to travel to do observations in a peer’s classroom, state funds are available for mileage. Administrator support and encouragement also play an important role in peer coaching success (Swafford, 1998). Administrators must value this process and be willing to provide time needed for teachers to visit and observe a partner’s classroom and to meet for professional conversations before and after observations. Administrators have sometimes struggled with the problem of teachers leaving class in order to participate in partner observations, so state resources were made available to fund substitute teachers as needed.

Another challenge to MNI partner observations is the need that this happen in an environment of mutual respect and trust that supports nonevaluation and a focus on learners and learning. For the MNI peer-coaching model, it is important...
that participants be willing to make changes and take the time to work through challenges with their peer coach and for observers to resist the impulse to evaluate the teaching. This wasn’t always easy, perhaps because some teachers may have only experienced high-stakes observations by supervisors or master teachers:

- Keeping the focus of the post-observation to a nonevaluative description was tough. I kept wanting to tell her where things went right and what could be improved rather than the description of the students and their reactions to the activity of the room.
- My partner kept asking for what she could have done better, and I worked to keep the focus on the students. (MNI peer-teaching participant)

Overall, however, evaluation of comments following the peer coaching cycle from 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 indicated that most teachers valued the experience and found it hugely beneficial to be both the observed teacher and the one observing. Most liked the Effective Numeracy Teaching Self-Assessment. Although not unanimously favored (four of 43 teachers reported that the tool was confusing or not helpful), the vast majority found it valuable to begin with the self-assessment to focus observations and set goals for instruction, as the following quotes from MNI participants in both cohorts attest:

- The self-assessment tool was helpful because it forced me to really evaluate not only what I teach, but how and also why I teach the way I do. It helped me to break out of my comfort zone, and start thinking outside the box. It made me realize that I have areas that I really am happy with the results, but also areas that I need to tweak and change.
- It helped me look into areas that I have not thought about before. It allowed me to get more specific about areas I wanted to improve on. It is nice to have something that makes you sit and reflect on the work you are doing.
- It made me look at what I’m already doing instead of only concentrating on in what ways I fall short. It was a simple, but thoughtful way to reflect on my teaching.
- I liked the idea of setting goals and something tangible for the other person to observe. I also enjoyed having someone come in to watch my teaching who had a similar background in numeracy.

Overall, comments about the partner observations echoed the conclusion of Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) that, with a voluntary process with clear guidelines and expectations, “the real educational power of peer observation is found in the sheer luxury of watching someone else teach for a time and discussing the teaching afterwards...the experience can be very rich indeed” (p. 167). Specifically, teachers commented on the value of observing, reflecting, and collaborating with a partner:
• I appreciated another set of eyes [in the classroom]. She could see the problem from a different lens. She also could see my students from a different perspective and offer other ways she would present the problem.
• Observing other teachers as they teach has been one of my favorite things to do because I get insights on what ideas work and how to present those ideas. What I found useful this time was the pre-planning and post-reflection activities. The method helps focus on both partners as observers and observed. The time to convene right after observation happened helps get ideas for improving the following lesson as well as future teaching of that particular lesson.
• Feedback based on a particular aspect of teaching was very helpful (rather than a general evaluation). It also helped that we had a shared language (from MNI) to discuss details about what was happening in both classes. It was also helpful to take time to see what is happening in other classes in general, just to widen my perspective.
• My partner was able to see small aspects of my teaching style and my students’ learning style that I overlook on a day-to-day basis in the busy interaction of the classroom. It was helpful to have an objective pair of eyes to observe what approaches and interactions work and which ones don’t and why. I am not always able to identify why something does not work, and my partner was able to provide some insight.

In our post-survey of MNI from both the first and second years, we asked participants to respond to the following question: As part of MNI, you had the opportunity to observe and collaborate with a peer for teaching. How likely are you to collaborate with a peer in the future and in what way? In both the 2011 and 2012 MNI cohorts, approximately 39 of 43 teachers, or 90%, indicated that the work with partners, including the observation, was something they would like to do again in the future. In fact, although we only require one observation each, feedback indicated that some would like for MNI to require multiple observations during the peer observation cycle. Given the success of peer coaching within MNI, we have been encouraged to integrate peer coaching into other professional development activities in the future.

LESSONS FOR SUPPORTING MENTORING AND COACHING IN PRACTICE

Although mentoring and peer coaching, regardless of the model, can be as challenging to implement as any other professional development, taken together, the experiences above lead us to several conclusions about the value of mentoring and peer coaching. First, particularly for ABE teachers, who are often isolated and rarely receive feedback about either their performance in the classroom or about how their students seem to be responding to their instruction, mentoring and peer coaching help to address teachers’ need for direct feedback. Teachers appreciate
the simple validation they can receive from mentors or coaches that they are “on
the right track.” Having another pair of trusted eyes in one’s classroom seems to
be a valuable component of helping teachers reflect on what is happening in the
classroom with students.

Second, both the available research and our experiences support the conclu-
sion that the processes and techniques applied in coaching provide opportunities
for teachers to become more reflective educators. This appears to work for both
mentor/coach and partner teacher; it is a mutual learning opportunity with a focus
on inquiry to guide reflection and changes in practice. ABE teachers in these three
models have indicated that they value the opportunity to learn with their peers
through reflective discussions.

Third, specific components of these mentoring or peer coaching models have
proved successful at guiding the professional development of ABE teachers. For
example, ABE teachers in Minnesota who have experienced peer coaching within
our professional development for numeracy instruction found the experience to
be affirming, and we have seen changes in instructional practices as a result. The
importance of training, structure, multiple opportunities to work and support one
another, and a focus on student learning are important aspects of the experience.
Perhaps the distinctive feature of the MNI peer coaching model is the use of a
self-assessment tool that builds on what was learned in the online course and pro-

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vides a platform for exploration and reflection for teachers, whatever their level
of experience. For the MNI, the Effective Numeracy Teaching Self-Assessment
has benefits as a tool to promote reflection and a focus on targeted instructional
practices for both observer and observed, and it can be used for multiple cycles
of peer observation and/or live beyond the experience for teachers seeking to
improve practices on their own. A basic tool can be modified for many contexts,
and, in Minnesota, we have created self-assessments around effective learner-cen-
tered instruction for English-language teaching, academic readiness, or volunteer
teachers working in a community-based program.

Another example of a specific component of mentoring or peer coaching is
the emphasis on the difference between coaching and evaluation. As discussed
earlier, teacher reflection is an integral part of coaching. Trust between the two
coaching participants is required to facilitate the reflective process. In Ohio, we
found it important to make clear that the role of the coach was to mirror and ask,
not to judge or evaluate. In a coaching relationship, any movement toward evalu-
ation (positive or negative) may take away from the teacher’s ability to reflect on
and honestly evaluate his or her own teaching.

Over the course of several years of piloting peer coaching, we have also
learned about the challenges in integrating coaching into professional develop-
ment. Peer coaching can be challenging to implement, in part because of the level
of trust that is required between the participants (Belzer et al., 2001). Relational
issues (between participants) are perhaps less of a consideration in other models
of professional development, such as workshops and study circles. It is possible
that this foundational component of peer coaching was not well established in the 2006 model of peer coaching in Ohio; teachers did not know the cadre of coaches well enough to engage in the process. When peers from the same program were trained in coaching techniques, teachers seemed more willing to participate. Asking teams of teachers (as opposed to a single teacher) from the same program to participate in state-sponsored professional development initiatives, and providing training in the skills of coaching, can facilitate the application of peer coaching.

The MNI paired teachers found success even with teachers who did not know each other at the outset, perhaps because numerous opportunities were built into the MNI model to develop trust and build the relationships between teachers. Professional developers and program leaders need to consider relationship building carefully when using these models of professional learning.

All professional development activities, including mentoring and peer coaching, require program leaders and professional development staff to consider elements such as audience and purpose/intended outcomes. The coaching model of shared learning can be applied between novice or expert teachers or between program administrators and support staff. Mentoring, as we have defined it here, is perhaps a more commonly implemented model of informal professional learning, perhaps because the expert/novice roles inherent in a mentoring relationship provide a familiar framework for mentors and mentees. The difficulty, then, is how to set up such mentoring on a more formal level, as part of a professional development system that can be organized intentionally; mentor teacher groups provide an example of how this might be done, since mentor teacher groups can work with teachers who do not initially know each other but have the opportunity, over the course of the group meetings, to build the types of relationships of trust that mentor/coaches and teachers need.

Thus, we argue that mentoring and coaching are promising forms of alternative professional development in the field of adult basic education, and possibly in other fields where teachers have differing levels of experience and training and who work in a wide range of teaching situations with a diverse population of students. Future research should investigate whether and how mentoring, as a form of professional development, works for teachers with different needs and questions, such as teachers who seek content, versus pedagogical, knowledge.

NOTES

1. School-based or job-embedded teacher learning circles (Webster-Wright, 2009; Ball & Cohen, 1999).
2. The Ohio ABE system is referred to as the ABLE (Adult Basic and Literacy Education) Program
3. Costa & Garmston’s Five States of Mind are (1) efficacy, (2) flexibility, (3) craftsmanship, (4) consciousness, and (5) interdependence.
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