

Coaching Young Tellers

2006

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As a young teacher, I struggled with education models that assumed students were empty vessels to be filled or would automatically fall into a “bell curve” of poor, average and smart. I also encountered many bright young people who dragged their feet when my answers, not their questions and interests, took center stage. So I searched my learning history for those – in and out of school - who had excited me and invited me to find my own way: a swimming coach who recognized and encouraged the leader in me; a math teacher who helped me see mistakes as learning steps, not failures; a priest who validated my feelings and my vision of the future; a history prof who noted my interest in the puzzle of diversity.

I also read academics like Lucy Calkins, Brian Cambourne and others who researched and promoted student-centered learning. They concurred with my hunch that good teaching was as much or more about supporting student risk-taking, about observing, questioning, and offering challenges than about providing the answers and labeling the students. Finally I began to work with my own writing and storytelling coaches who helped me look within for my artistic uniqueness.

Coaching *interfaith youth tellers*, my partner Mary Murphy and I found that the general principles listed below still applied. In retrospect we wished we had had more time to help our young tellers **choose** stories. But once they had picked a tale to work with, we focused on their needs and their skills as individuals. Again, because of time, we didn’t teach peer-coaching per se, but we encouraged participants to notice and appreciate each other’s tales. We found that if we stuck to the following principles we could solve whatever problems appeared.

1. Believe in the teller’s potential.

Trust in the good work each teller *will be able to do* when he/she is more experienced and confident. Believe that the teller is naturally smart and creative. The coach’s job is to watch for when and how each teller shines and help the teller follow that spark. In the early stages of development, offer encouraging facial expressions and your delighted, *relaxed* attention. Students “catch” a coach’s anxiety. Convey "You’re doing fine!" and young tellers will relax and improve with practice.

Why is this the first and most important stage of coaching? Learners new at a skill or working with a new story are vulnerable and can give up easily. Criticism activates their "fight or flight" response: "I can't do this!"/"Who cares? I'll never be a good storyteller." Once a new teller is discouraged the route to success is a long hard climb. The #1 job of the COACH is to appear confident in the teller’s "smarts." Hold (fiercely *and* tenderly) to your belief in his *potential*. If you were corrected and criticized in your early years, this is no easy stance. Nurturing takes practice. Be specific and supportive about *what works* in a new teller’s performance. The encouraged artist thinks, "Really? You like my story? Wait till you see how good it's going to be!"

2. Put and keep the teller in charge. The teller should control the length and pace of the coaching. Stay attentive to his or her energies. Let a teller know from the beginning that you are in the service of *the teller’s vision*. Observe and question more than you direct.

3. Begin feedback with appreciations. Compliment ANY skillful aspect: flow, rhythm, design, voice modulation, movement, etc. You or others may offer a personal response (“Your story made me feel/ reminded me of...”) but *don’t draw attention away from the teller or tale*. Appreciations should free the

teller's thinking. Leave space for the teller to take them in, speak of new insights or ask his own questions.

Appreciations must be genuine. Look and listen deeply for what IS there (*not what's missing*). *Retrain* your critical eye, ear, and tongue to note what is unique, alive, and seems "right" about a tale. Keep appreciations *clean* – separate from questions and suggestions – so the teller can really take them in.

4. Offer the teller a chance to speak. Both hearing and speaking *process talk* helps artists name their discoveries. After appreciations, tellers often have some insight. Listen. Ask questions such as, "How did that go?" or "Where did you connect to the tale (or audience)?" "Was anything troubling as you told?" Limit process questioning but encourage tellers to speak about their work. They will see changes they want to make. Teach tellers to ask questions of their listeners – "How did ___ go?" Or "Would you like more/less of something?" but only once they seem truly confident and supported by the group. (see #5)

5. Offer questions and suggestions with a light touch.

Ask, "Would you like questions or suggestions?" BEWARE: Pointed suggestions too early in a teller's development *shut down creative risk-taking* and sometimes make tellers defensive. Young tellers grow into fine-tuning artists once they feel truly supported. Then questions awaken the teller to new ideas, and suggestions become tools for improving. No comment should shame the teller or come from the coach's ego. A coach's job is to **empower the artist**, leave her feeling energized, creative, and smart.

MIT (Most Important Thing) questions (coined by Doug Lipman) include: "What do you love about the story?" or "What's the most important thing for you in this tale?" Offer such queries **after** the telling. They often lead the teller to new insight and can serve as a guiding light for choices the teller will make.

Ask genuinely about what you want to understand more fully or imagine more clearly about the tale. Tone is everything. Avoid sarcasm or taking control of the tale. ("Do this. Change this.") Genuine artistic development comes when the teller *discovers* changes to make and incorporates them.

Want to try something? is a way to suggest new technique (changing narration to dialogue, adding gesture, making eye contact, etc.). Give the teller the right to refuse any suggestion. You may imagine several ways a story *could* improve, but more than a few suggestions overload a young teller's thinking. Praise small improvements. Teach to the teller's potential, not just to the particular tale being told. Often students are "set" on one tale, but they will incorporate a suggestion in their next work.

Model what you want young learners to do. Share *brief* tales of learning how to make changes to *your* work. Coaches invite learning through actions more than words. Show the growing, changing artist *you* are: what it means to be vulnerable, take risks, accept help, and make changes in order to grow as an artist.

Have fun. Coaching means being an ally. Responses should help tellers think in new ways. Encourage risk-taking. True coaching is not about persuading learners to YOUR way of thinking, it's about freeing their creative intelligence. If you get UPSET as you coach, that's your ego. Nurture aliveness and uniqueness. There's no right way in art. Engaging the teller and the audience is key.