

Podcast Episode 35

Welcome back to the Education Table. I'm Katie Novak and today we're talking about one of the most critical roles in transforming schools from teacher centered to learner centered. Instructional coaches.

And by the way, instructional coaches, I love you, I see you and I know how powerful your work is. If you're a coach or work with one, you already know it's never about fixing teachers. The best athletes and musicians in the world have multiple coaches.

It is not about weakness; it's about continued excellence. It's about walking alongside experts who always have room for more growth as partners, co designers and champions for change. Everyone on our team at Novak goes through instructional coaching cycles which with our very own Lisa Bosio as having support while you work towards your goals and a, non judgmental accountability partner is pure magic.

But here is the question. How do we, when we act as coaches, help make instructional shifts that stick? For me, obviously, the answer is always universal design for learning.

So let's dive into stories, some research and some real strategies that instructional coaches can use to bring out the very best in the brilliant educators they support. Now let me take you back to the first time I ever strapped on a pair of skis. I did not grow up skiing.

In fact, I was 39 when I took my first lesson. And let me just say, learning to ski as an adult is nothing like watching my kids learn to ski. It took them like two seconds when they fell down, they bounced right back up.

But as an adult, you fall and then you bruise and you start fantasizing about sitting in the lodge in front of the fire with a hot toddy. But I digress. I was determined to learn how to ski.

So I signed up for a lesson with my sister, rented the gear, and showed up on an icy hill with a whole lot of nervous energy. Enter, the instructor. He was this lovely older man, the kind who had been coaching since before chairlifts were invented.

And he had that quiet confidence about him, like he had seen it all. He never, ever made me feel silly for being scared. He didn't overwhelm me with techniques or start lecturing me.

He just stood beside me. He was so calm and steady. And he said, okay, first thing, you're going to want to lean back, but you don't want to do that.

You're going to want to, but don't. Bend your knees and lean forward like what I'm doing here. I've got you.

And that was it. It was just tiny cues like that that changed everything. Now, we did not tackle a black diamond that day.

But what we did do was build my confidence from the bunny hill to a green trail, and he taught us both how to work with the mountain, not against it, how to move with the terrain instead of stiffening up and falling and making injuries worse. One of my favorite pieces of advice was to hold my hands out like I was holding a cafeteria tray. And I still think of that when I do ski on black diamonds.

So since then, my sister and I try to take a ski lesson together every couple of years. Not because we're aiming to master some epic slope, but because our bodies are changing, the terrain is always changing, and we want to keep adjusting our form so we can keep showing up with joy and strength on the mountain and earn our hot toddies at the end of the day. And that's what great coaching is.

It's not a lecture or someone who's going to point out your weaknesses. It's someone who sees you exactly where you are, sees where you want to go, and helps you to make small, strategic shifts and reminds you along the way that it's okay to wobble and even fall as you learn. And that's exactly what instructional coaches do for educators.

They're not evaluators. They're not there to overhaul everything at once. They're partners.

They're the ones who help us adjust our stance when standards change, when students have needs we have never seen before, or when a new strategy feels outside of our comfort zone. And Universal Design for Learning has the same mindset. It's not about scrapping what works.

It's about making thoughtful, proactive adjustments so that everyone, students and teachers alike, can navigate the proverbial mountain of education. Now, let's ground all of this in some research. A 2018 meta analysis by Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, in the Review of Educational Research, found that instructional coaching had a greater impact on student practice than traditional professional development.

When coaching is personalized, ongoing, and focused on instructional change, the effects are significant not just for teachers, but for student outcomes, too. The effect size of coaching on instructional practice was more than double that of traditional PD. And the longer the coaching was sustained, the more student achievement improved.

But here's the thing. Coaching only works when it's done well, when it's personalized, when it's sustained over time, and when it's aligned to meaningful instructional shifts and rooted in trust. And that's why it pairs so beautifully with Universal Design for Learning.

Because UDL gives us the what and the why, and coaching helps us with the how. So what does this look like in practice? Let's dive into the strategies.

The first step in any good coaching relationship is clarifying the goal of working together. Now, before diving into a new strategy or initiative, start by asking, what is it that you're hoping for for your students? What is your goal for student learning?

Strip away the technology, the tool, the checklist, the initiative. We have to ask what is it that we want for our students? What do we want them to know and be able to do?

And when coaches help teachers zoom in on clear, firm goals, it becomes so much easier to design flexible paths to get there. But it also honors the experience of teachers who know and love their content and their students. I always say the goal is not UDL, which I know is shocking for me to say, but the goal is to increase student outcomes, it's to increase student engagement, it's to increase student confidence.

And one way to get there is to universally design instruction. But we have to start with those true goals. Now, once we understand a teacher's goals, we need to be very flexible in how we support them.

Just like students, teachers thrive when they have a voice and agency. Some educators might want to watch a model lesson before they teach it themselves. Others might just want to co plan and brainstorm ideas and then get right into it and try it in their classroom.

Some might want to talk it out or observe a colleague. Others need a little bit of time to process and reflect even before planning. Great coaches can read the room and adapt their support based on how each teacher learns best and then provide feedback throughout the process.

And this just in time coaching is just what my skiing instructor did. It's absolutely priceless. Another thing we have to do as coaches is lower the stakes to raise the bar.

One of the most powerful things a coach can do is to create psychological safety. We have to normalize experimentation and micro failure on the road to macro success. So we can say things like, well, let's try it, reflect and then we'll tweak as needed.

I'll always say if it works, we'll celebrate it. If it doesn't work, we'll celebrate that we found a way that it's not going to be successful. And then what an amazing opportunity to try it

another way.

That small shift from performance and perfection to practice and progress opens the door to real change. From there we can co design a path forward. We can start saying, okay, so what is one thing you'd like to try between now and the next time we meet?

And then follow up with what would make that feel doable and how can I help you? Whether that is we're going to be coteaching, whether that's creating a tool together, whether that's checking in by text. The step is about we are present, we are responsive.

We are here for you. Instead of just ending a cycle with a recap, we can kind of push forward into the next cycle and ask, okay, so what is one small change you're curious to try in the next cycle? Or what do you want more of from me as a coach so that you feel like you're as successful as you can possibly be?

These moments give teachers ownership, and they also give you feedback that you need to support them better the next time. In this episode, we explored how coaching through a UDL lens means embracing variability, honoring professional judgment, and building capacity through trust and design. And it's not just about what we do as coaches.

It's about how we do it. When we clarify goals, offer flexible choices, remove barriers, provide in time feedback and cues, and support and reflect together, we're not just promoting UDL. We are living it.

And that kind of modeling leads to the kind of sustained instructional shifts that we're aiming for. So if you're an instructional coach wondering how to move the needle, here's the invitation. Be the kind of coach you want a teacher to be for their students.

Thank you so much for joining me at the Education Table. If this episode sparked an idea, share it with a fellow coach or teacher. And let's keep designing better experiences one conversation at a time.

Until, next time, lovely educators, onward.