

# How Coaching Techniques Motivate and Engage Students to Talk Content

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How often have you heard a teacher state, “I refuse to teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade. What a developmental mess!” As our students reach the pinnacle of their “tween” stage, they grope with such issues as becoming more independent, handling increased academic expectations, questioning their peer group opportunities, and conforming or challenging the pop culture. We offer the art of coaching to calm the emotions and to help students increase their self confidence during these formidable years.

Developmentally, as students begin to center a great deal of attention on their social skills, coaching achieves superb results by building trusting relationships. Coaching strives to create an environment where pupils’ stresses levels decrease at the same time that the success ratio spirals upwards. Coaching inspires and motivates students by actively guiding and instilling the confidence to take risks and to face the challenges. It helps them deal with emotional, social, and physical changes that cause such a flux in their behavior.

Just as coaching enjoys a much deserved reputation throughout the sports world, it has found a place in Corporate America. It is not uncommon today for CEOs, presidents, and managers to have personal, executive coaches (Zeus and Skiffington, 2001). Similarly, the world of life coaching has become firmly established, helping college students, career seekers, or empty nesters make life decisions as they face the crossroads ahead (Marklein, 2005; Guarino, 2004). So, if coaching is becoming an integrated part of society, shouldn’t we be training our youth at an age when they are most ready to integrate it?

Where sports coaches focus on the athletes’ abilities, teachers as coaches place their focus on the students and their abilities to discover and explore ideas rather than memorize and regurgitate facts. A coaching school offers the opposite of an environment where the emphasis is on a predetermined set of skills to be covered or the teacher’s ability to espouse historical data. As Alfie Kohn states, “ ‘Putting children first’ is an empty slogan if we watch passively while our schools are turned into test-prep centers,” (2005, p. 20).

Our current environment, “does little to support the pursuit of cognitive surprise, the creation of intrinsic forms of motivation, the development of imagination, or the ability to define and resolve one’s problems” (Eisner, 2005, p. 17). At the middle level, where student interest in academics lessons as their interest in social groups heighten, the teacher as coach models techniques that motivate and engage students in the learning process so that their full potential is developmentally realized.

“I firmly believe that the key to academic achievement is the quality of interpersonal relationship between teacher and student.”

*-Michael Yazurlo  
Superintendent*

## Defining Coaching

If we want our tweens to use coaching, then the teacher has to model and teach those skills. Our modified definition of coaching from the business world (Longenecker & Pinkel, 1997) is: a teacher in the capacity of a coach is one who continually strives to unlock the potential that resides within all students, bringing their performance to the highest level attainable; offering inspiration, guidance, training, and modeling, to enhance their abilities through motivation and support. A teacher as coach helps students:

- Find their inner strengths and passions in order to nurture self worth and identity
- Have a voice in their own learning and to negotiate collectively with the teacher to create the goals and objectives
- Passionately engage in *talking content* to increase their memory retention and to fuel motivation to learn
- Use their gifts and inner talents to bring their work and efforts to the highest level of scholarship attainable.

“It gives the quiet ones a voice – makes you aware of talents you might not have observed.”

-Cathy Carnrite  
Teacher

## Overall View of Coaching

What makes a school where coaching is practiced so different? As the superintendent or principal walks the corridors, one sees teachers and students designing new projects on a continuous basis because risk taking behavior is applauded; where initial results that may be rough are refined like a polished diamond. The classrooms are hives of activity, with students preparing for discussion exercises where all voices are accountable and heard.

The youngsters work well together in their cooperative groups, meshing ideas to reach a common goal. They are encouraged to bring charts, graphs, diagrams, and pictures to enhance their performance during a debate or discussion, and they are made to feel they have ownership in their own learning. Their discussions, centered on multiple perspectives, encourage tolerance. By accepting other viewpoints, students solve problems and conflicts through negotiation and compromise. Dialogue between teachers and students is constant, an egalitarian process that promotes respect, trust, and knowledge. Behavioral problems in the classroom are few and rare, as teachers like Kim Trettor and Lydia Caprarella hone their skills at Life Sciences Secondary School in New York City. They have found that due to increased student motivation and engagement, test scores have increased. Their principal, Genevieve Stanislaus, walks past their classrooms and she hears *students talking content* in a meaningful way.

“Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses... I like how it empowers students to be the most effective with the gifts they have.”

-Genevieve Stanislaus  
Principal

## Techniques of Educational Coaching

There are many techniques that teachers as coaches use. We will examine a few of these techniques and will show how they can become embedded in strategies that tap Bloom’s higher levels of thinking, which promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

In a coaching environment, what makes a teacher superb is the ability to listen effectively and respond with a question or statement that moves the students' thinking forward. Listening and questioning may sound like easy tasks, but in fact, they are extraordinarily difficult in practice. A teacher has to think spontaneously, in an environment where dialogue is encouraged and provoked. It is a place where the teacher as coach is comfortable enough to allow the students to make investigations on their own and to come to the table ready to have a discussion, debate, or simulation, where they have to perform and take risks in front of their peers.

## **Negotiable Contracting Allows Students to Have a Voice in Their Assessment**

There is no getting away from the fact that our learners are always overly concerned about their grades. In the coaching environment, the teacher as coach initiates a dialogue with the class, an egalitarian “eyeball to eyeball” talk with the students empowering them to decide what exactly should be graded and how. What can better demonstrate the highest level of attainment in the learning experience than the give and take of a dialogue, where teacher and students exchange ideas and information in a setting that teems with mutual respect and is done on a footing of equality.



*-Meghan Good  
Robert Wagner MS*

The process can be easily implemented in a few short steps. It is important that the teacher and the students discuss the project – term paper, activity, discussion, debate, art project – and what is expected. Lydia Caprarella explains to her students they will decide on how the project will be graded, and outlines the procedure to them in the following manner:

"I want you to put yourself in my place. You are the teacher. A student hands in this project (or paper) that you consider to be worth an A grade. What are the specific criteria that help you determine that it is excellent?"

"For example, if you wrote a speech to convince your peers to extend the lunch period, criterion for grading your speech may be your ability to be persuasive, use logic, be captivating, as well as use of good grammar.

"So, now let's turn back to the project at hand. Working in your cooperative groups, generate a list of criteria that you, as a teacher, would use for grading purposes. We will examine them together and make a list that we can agree on together."

Lydia calls on one speaker at a time from each cooperative group who submits a criterion to be listed on the board. After all of the groups have been given the opportunity to submit their ideas, the students discuss them. It might happen that Lydia has a criterion that was not posted on the board that is essential to a fair and equitable assessment of the project being assigned. If that is the case,

[Elements of our] grading were neatness, amount of research, creativity and information included. It was up to us to include these essentials..."

*-Nao Yoneda  
Student*

she explains in detail the additional item being added to the list, and why it is so important for inclusion. Lydia and her students negotiate together and prioritize the four or five criteria for selection.

### **The Levels of Listening**

Where teachers are immersed in the methodology of coaching, they use a skill called deep listening. In the school where coaching has been inculcated as a daily ritual, the highest levels of listening are a constant recognized presence. Teachers who are closed to their own personal growth respond to these questions by stating that they only function at the highest level. However, while training Lydia and Kim, we all laughed together because there are times where we can function at the highest level, but admit to sometimes slipping inadvertently to the lowest when the environment becomes stressful.

At the lowest level of listening, the teacher is really not hearing or engaged, and basically ignores the student. At the next level, the teacher listens subjectively, turning what the student states and taking ownership of it, and discusses it from his or her perspective. More objective listening occurs at the third level where the teacher listens from the view of the student and makes inquiries. And finally, the teacher listens deeply at the highest level when behavioral and body cues are taken into account along with what the student states. Therefore, the major difference between the lowest and highest levels of listening is when Kim and Lydia concentrate objectively and emphatically on their students.

### **Guided Listening**

If the concentration always remains on the needs of students, this becomes quite evident as the teacher as coach moves beyond the levels and employs guided listening. Here again, is a helpful coaching tool applied as a response to students; the twist is using a question or statement as a counter to what they asked, allowing them to find their own way or their own solution. Sometimes students are stuck and need help to move forward so that they can complete the task at hand. At times, students just need to be acknowledged; other times the teacher as coach can guide them to move forward. Let's examine two of the many specific skills used by certified coaches when speaking to individuals:

### **Acknowledging**

Letting students know that you have heard them is a powerful tool. Using this skill, the teacher reflects back through paraphrasing what was said.

#### *Social Studies Class:*

Vikram: I keep looking for books that would help me prepare, but they seem too difficult.

Mrs. Trettor: You can't seem to find anything at the workstation that is at a comfortable reading level.

#### *Chemistry Class:*

Miguel: To set up this experiment, I need a mid-size beaker.

“Now, the whole environment in the class is much different than how I taught before. Students want to express what they think and are willing to get involved with the topic.”

-Joan Jung  
Teacher

“One thing I love about this approach is that you begin to listen with your eyes. It allows you to extend the dialogue while the focus remains on the student.”

-Libby Wicks  
Teacher

Ms. Marcus: In other words, the beakers that are available are not the correct size.

“It caused me to be aware of group interactions and to try to sort out the roots of certain groups’ problems.”  
-Lydia Caprarella  
Teacher

### **Validation**

When emotions arise, it is important for a teacher to recognize how a student is feeling, especially when it affects the learning environment. This skill is not judgmental in terms of being right or wrong. It allows the student to know that you are seeing the world from his or her perspective.

#### *Drama Class:*

Cassandra: I’m really upset that I wasn’t chosen for the solo part in the county production.

Ms. Lopez: It is very normal to have those feelings. You practiced hard and you put all your efforts into trying out.

Using acknowledging and validating together are powerful tools. We offer you a real life example to stress our point. Just imagine calling the telephone company after a heavy storm, complaining that you can’t reach your 85 year old mother. Normally, their response is that the storm wasn’t their fault and that they are trying their best; and to please calm down. But instead; after listening to you vent your anxieties, the customer representative states, “This must be a stressful time for you as you are unable to reach your elderly mother. (Acknowledgement) You and others in your position have every right to plead for service. (Validation) I’ll place your mother’s name on the emergency list and we will make her a priority. I’ll call you back in 24 hours with an update.” (Giving Empowerment)

### **The 3-Step Process of Problem Solving**

There are always those moments when a student, or even an administrator, finds that they have hit a wall. Not literally, of course, but they are suddenly confronted by a problem that seems impossible to solve. In this situation, a teacher as coach could come to the rescue, using the 3-Step Process (iPEC, 2005) that achieves great results. In essence, it is a reflective process to ask the right questions (Wright, 1998). The coach, working with the student, looks back upon similar situations to determine what has been successful, allowing the youngster to decide what exactly had made it successful, why it succeeded in the first place, and how that particular formula can be applied. It gives them empowerment and motivation.

“I like the 3-Step Process because it focuses on accomplished results and does not ponder on past challenges, but rather past successes.”  
-Michael Pastena  
Trainer & Coach

**Step 1:** What in the **past was similar** to what you are dealing with currently? How were you able to solve that problem? Describe what made it successful.

**Step 2:** Why did it **work so well**? How can you assess what worked? Describe specifically what steps you used.

**Step 3:** How can you use that knowledge and **apply it to your current situation**? What information from that experience is powerful that can be applied now? What strengths and resources do you have that will help you achieve your current goal?

The 3-Step Process was put to excellent use by Ms. Orlov in her science classroom. The class was preparing a major discussion, with several perspectives, on the successes and failures of major hydroelectric projects throughout the world. Circulating from group to group, Ms. Orlov noticed that Blanche Polinski, a good student and usually very active, was focusing her attention that day on what was happening beyond the classroom window rather than on her work.

Ms. Orlov, taking her aside, gently admonished Blanche, telling her, “You were assigned to read material on hydroelectric projects, to understand how power is generated, and to prepare for the discussion. But you seem to be elsewhere today.”

Shy and slightly embarrassed, Blanche admitted that she didn’t understand much of the material, replying, “I get frustrated when there aren’t any pictures of diagrams to go along with the explanation.”

Ms. Orlov took Blanche aside to avoid embarrassing her in front of the other students and groups and asked, “Could it be that you’re a visual learner?”

This seemed slightly confusing to the young girl who didn’t understand the point Ms. Orlov was making, but Blanche admitted, “I love art, and art classes. Drawing is my favorite activity.”

That some progress was being made satisfied Ms. Orlov. “Fine, Blanche,” she said, “you love art, and drawing is your favorite class. In your other classes, when you don’t understand the text, what have you done to help you understand the work?” (Step 1)

Blanche gave the question some thought. “Well, in math class,” she explained, “I like to use those fun materials – the mini canisters – for algebra. I pretend the ‘x’ is hidden inside the canister. I can see what the algebraic expression means.”

Ms. Orlov was pleased with the dialogue taking place. “Once you’ve used the cans,” Ms. Orlov asked, “then what do you do to finish your work and complete the assignments for homework?” (Step 2)

With a degree of confidence Blanche answered, “I draw them in my notebook. After awhile, I don’t need the drawings, but they help me out in the beginning to understand what I’m doing.”

Moving just a bit closer to Blanche and looking directly into her eyes, Ms. Orlov inquired, “How could you use your special artistic talent and apply it here? (Step 3)

At that moment it seemed as if a great weight had been lifted from the young girl’s shoulders. With a hesitant smile, Blanche replied, “I haven’t given it much thought, but I could draw a picture for each section as I read through all of the material at the work station.”

That Ms. Orlov was pleased would be an understatement. She had guided Blanche to find her own way. As she walked with Blanche back to the group she told her, “That’s a great idea, and it just might work. I’ll keep an eye on you to see if you continue to have difficulties. If you’re pleased with your drawings, do you think we could use them as a model to help others understand hydroelectric power? (*Empowerment and Motivation*)

Blanche’s reply was a smile capable of warming the coldest heart.

### **COACHing Questions for Cooperative Group Work**

The objective of a teacher as coach is to elicit responses that reflect how well cooperative groups or a student is progressing. The questions should be open-ended, probing for as much detail and description as possible. Teachers such as Kim Trettor and Lydia Caprarella have the acronym and its definition posted on the wall so that peers in cooperative groups can help each other. COACH, the acronym, stands for Clarity of task, Ownership, Attentive, Comprehension, and checking for Heightened or Hidden emotions. Questions or statements that Kim and Lydia pose while circulating to each cooperative group are:

- C = Clarity of Task:** Please explain to me in your own words what you need to accomplish. Explain specifically what you have decided to do.
- O = Ownership:** How have you decided to divide the responsibility? For what reasons do you feel that this is fair in terms of your workload?
- A = Attentive:** Please share with me what you have been able to accomplish thus far today. Describe in detail how well you think you are working as a group. In what ways is this relevant to what you are trying to achieve together?
- C = Comprehension:** Please show me where you found this information because I find it fascinating. Please explain the most important points that you found in your research. For what reasons does this information make sense to you? For what reasons do you think you can make the connection?
- H = Heightened or Hidden Emotions:** I noticed that there is very little discussion at this table. Please share with me how you feel your group is functioning right now. It appears that this group has divided itself into pairs. Please describe what has taken place.



*Lydia Caprarella  
Life Sciences Sec. School*

By asking COACHing questions, Kim and Lydia inspire students to probe deeper, rather than becoming defensive where they feel inadequate. It also allows them to become part of the inquiry process, where they model that they are not the sole repositories of all knowledge, but are interested primarily in their students' unique research and projects. As students take risks and try new endeavors, it is important for the teacher to guide them and facilitate learning in a positive fashion. By prompting students with specific questions that initiate scholarship, teachers allow students to think critically and apply multiple perspectives. When the teacher abandons the phrase "should have" and replaces it with "May I suggest," "You may want to consider," or "In what ways can you..." the responsibility takes a major shift from the teacher to the students (Crane, 2002). This offers students the choice to respond to the needed change.

"Using COACHing questions is a good way to determine that students understand tasks and work completely and thoroughly. It also helps the teacher to see where students need extra clarification or attention."

-Kim Trettor  
Teacher

## **A Coaching School, A Coaching Community**

Our goal is to ignite people's thinking and to be a catalyst for educational change. What would happen if superintendents coached principals, principals coached teachers, teachers coached students, and students coached their peers? It would create a coaching environment vertically as well as horizontally. Not only would these skills resonate throughout the confines of the school, but they could also be extended to PTA organizations where the techniques could infiltrate into the home environment with beneficial results. After approximately 30 years of teaching, these techniques have defined us as educators like no other previous training. This was a step that improved our lives, our relationships, our teaching, and the way we viewed the world.

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