



# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



[Buy this issue](#)

- [Read Abstract](#)

October 2011 | Volume 69 | Number 2  
 Coaching: The New Leadership Skill Pages 24-29

## Modeling Lessons

*Katherine Casey*

**Teachers need to see effective instructional strategies in action before they can make them their own.**

When I work around the United States with teachers and coaches, our conversations are frequently peppered with the same questions and comments:

- "I can't imagine that instructional approach working with my students. What would it actually look like in my classroom?"
- "I wish someone would just show me how to use this teaching method with *my* students."
- "I need to see students being successful with these new materials before I feel comfortable using them."

These comments remind us that as teachers try out new pedagogical strategies, they crave explicit demonstrations. Of course, teachers can always read and discuss articles that describe a new teaching method, but most of us want and need to see the approach in action. We want to see another teacher interacting with students, managing behaviors, juggling instructional materials, pacing the lesson to keep students engaged, checking for understanding, and making necessary adjustments. We benefit from witnessing how students react to the content and the pedagogy and from imagining how it would go if we were teaching the lesson to our own students.

Successful coaches, therefore, know the importance of modeling lessons to help teachers develop a vision of effective instruction. Coaches may demonstrate live lessons in classrooms with teachers observing, they may use videos they create of themselves or of other teachers, or they may purchase professionally made videos. The following guidelines will help coaches model lessons most effectively.

## Live Demonstration Lessons

### Develop a Clear Purpose

Nearly every coach I know can share stories about demonstrating a lesson for a teacher who starts correcting papers, organizes classroom materials, steps into the hallway to call a parent, or even takes an extended bathroom or coffee break. When I reflect on why some teachers have viewed my demonstration lessons as coverage for a class period rather than as professional development, it comes down to my failure to establish a clear purpose before the lesson.

To be effective, what you demonstrate should be connected to ongoing and intensive learning in which teachers are already engaging (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Whenever possible, demonstrate a lesson for a group of teachers rather than just one. Try to schedule the lesson for a time when colleagues with a common interest in the topic can join the classroom teacher. Use the lesson as a way to build capacity and collaboration.

Have a conversation about what, exactly, the teacher wants you to demonstrate and why. Be prepared to help narrow the focus so that the teacher knows what to look for during the lesson. Recently, a teacher and I were planning by e-mail for the lesson she wanted me to demonstrate as part of our grade-level study of differentiated instruction. The teacher wrote, "I just want to see a guided reading lesson. Anything you can show me would help, because I can't picture doing guided reading with 5th graders."

I've learned that when we try to see everything that happens in a lesson, it gets overwhelming and we're more likely to tune out. So I responded,

*It makes sense that you'd like to see a guided reading lesson, especially since we've been learning about how to assess students as they read and discuss the text. While I demonstrate, I could emphasize how I take notes as I observe silent readers or how I use my observations of students attempting to read tricky words to model word-solving strategies. Or I could show you how I try to draw Jeremiah into the lesson because he is usually so reticent. Which aspect of guided reading would you like to focus on as I demonstrate—assessing students, word-solving strategies, student engagement, or something else I haven't listed?*

## Think Aloud While Teaching

Much of the complexity of teaching comes from the in-the-moment decisions teachers must make as the lesson unfolds. Make the invisible decision-making process visible by thinking aloud, explaining the what, why, and when of your teaching (Wilhelm, 2001). I usually alert the students and teacher to my plan to think aloud by saying at the beginning of the lesson,

*Students, I'm planning to talk to your teacher (and any other observing teachers) as I work with you. I'll keep my comments brief and then turn my attention right back to you. I'll say things like, "Mrs. Griffin, I noticed that just a few students shared their thinking during this partner talk time. I'm going to model again for students how to use text evidence to support our thinking, have the students practice finding evidence with me as a whole group, and then release the work back into partner talk." OK, students, here we go.*

## Engage Observing Teachers

Research supports professional development that provides opportunities for active, hands-on learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). When modeling a lesson, be deliberate about getting observing teachers involved. Here are a few ways to do so.

*Scaffold observation and note taking.* Together, develop a recording sheet on which teachers can take notes during the observation. You can create a checklist of pedagogical actions or student behaviors to look for; provide prompts like "List the ways the demonstrating teacher reengages students who lose focus during the lesson"; or have teachers create an observation sheet that meets their needs. Use the teachers' observation notes during the follow-up conference to analyze the lesson.

*Use assessment data to identify focus students.* Teachers often have concerns about specific learners who need additional support, who need to be challenged, or who pose management challenges. Identify and list the focus students on a recording sheet and suggest that the teacher take notes on those students and how you address their needs throughout the lesson.

*Encourage teachers to be "students."* Sometimes the goal of our work is for teachers to develop a sense of what it feels like to be a student experiencing a particular lesson. I have teachers participate just as the students do. I usually film the lesson (with teacher and student permission) so that the teachers and I can study the pedagogy later. During the lesson follow-up meeting, we discuss their experiences and the implications for teaching.

*"Push pause" to involve teachers in the lesson.* I like to purposefully involve observing teachers using a method I call "push pause" coaching. At the start of the lesson, I let students know that from time to time I plan to pause the lesson so that I can talk with the teachers. I explain, "During the brief pause, you are expected to wait quietly, thinking about what you've just learned or what you'd like to say next, or perhaps stopping and jotting in your notebooks. When I push play, the lesson will resume."

I may pause a lesson at a preplanned moment to have an observing teacher assume responsibility for teaching part of the lesson. I alert both the students and teacher that I am about to hand off the teaching baton to another educator by saying something like, "Please pause for a moment, students. Mr. Craig said he'd like to model his thinking about the bias in the text to give you another perspective to consider. When he's ready, Mr. Craig will push play."

I also push pause to get advice from the observing teachers when I need to make an in-the-moment decision. "Let's pause for a moment. Teachers, I need your advice. Is there evidence in your observation notes that the students are ready to take this strategy on independently?" Or, more frequently, "Teachers, I'm not sure where to go from here. What do you recommend?"

Whether the pause points are spontaneous or planned, they are always connected to our ongoing professional development and are designed to be collaborative and collegial.

## Videotaped Lessons

Another way to show teachers explicit examples of instructional practices is to use videotaped lessons. There are practical reasons for choosing to use a video instead of demonstrating a live lesson. For one thing, a group of teachers can watch a video without actually being in the classroom and potentially disturbing the classroom dynamic. Also, when you watch a video of a lesson, you can rewind and watch parts again or pause the video to answer questions or have a conversation about what's happening. Here are several ways to get the most from videotaped lessons.

### Be the Guinea Pig

Before I share a new instructional strategy with teachers in professional development, I like to try it out first in the classroom. Of course, my initial attempts rarely go perfectly. Luckily, I have a trusting relationship with several teachers who let me try new instructional approaches with their students. They do not giggle (at least not in front of me) when I fumble through lessons or when they hear me say to the students, "Would it be OK if we stop this lesson, since I'm not really sure what I'm doing? May I try again in a little while?"

A fellow coach suggested that I set up my video camera or camera phone on a tripod to film my initial efforts so that I could pinpoint what worked and what needed to be tweaked during the next lesson. His sage advice turned out to be a gold mine for professional development.

Until recently, I skipped over my embarrassing early attempts and only showed teachers my more polished teaching. But polished lessons don't reflect the reality of how awkward the first few lessons can be when we try new approaches. Showing teachers only my more polished lessons sometimes inadvertently intimidated or alienated them.

Now I share my fumbling first attempts with colleagues to encourage them to jump in and try new approaches and strategies. We use the videos as a starting place for conversations about what worked and what didn't, how students reacted, what needs revision and additional practice, and whether my lesson captured the essence of the strategy. My willingness to let others witness my struggles leads to increased trust and a spirit of experimentation among my colleagues. Often, other teachers are inspired to videotape their teaching to share with others.

### Show Teacher and Student Growth

When I have the opportunity to teach a series of lessons in the same classroom or to try out the same lesson in several different classrooms, I videotape every lesson. Then I select short clips from each lesson that show some aspect of evolution, such as increased student engagement, less awkwardness on my part, better pacing, or evidence of student learning. The clips help address such questions as, "What did you do the next day? How do lessons build on each other? Were the students able to apply the strategy independently?"

Taping the same students periodically is a fascinating way to document student growth. It can also help facilitate discussions about why a particular student is not progressing.

### Consider Using Professionally Made Videos

Many professional texts now come with accompanying DVDs. When you choose to use such videos (or any professional development strategy), take into account what you know about your teachers. Some teachers watch a professionally made instructional video, find it eye-opening, and begin to pursue additional knowledge and skill to make what was happening on the video a reality in their classrooms. Other teachers need to see effective instruction happening with their students, in their classrooms, live and unedited, in order to believe it's possible.

Context matters. When you consider using a video, whether it's professionally made or one you create, be thoughtful about

- *Instructional materials.* Do your teachers have access to and the liberty to use similar materials?
- *Age of the students.* Are they similar in age to the viewers' students?
- *Student demographics.* Can teachers see their students reflected in the faces of the children on screen?

### Create Tape A and Tape B

Have you ever presented new teaching ideas, only to have other teachers comment that the new ideas are no different from what they're already doing? An approach I call Tape A, Tape B enables teachers to see lessons side-by-side to understand how the new strategy differs from their current practice.

First, determine what constitutes a typical lesson by conducting a quick walk-through in a number of classrooms. Try to notice common instructional practices that need strengthening. Create Tape A by filming yourself or a volunteer teacher conducting a lesson that represents this typical instructional practice.

Create Tape B by videotaping a second lesson demonstrating more effective teaching techniques. Use the same or similar students, text, and instructional focus so that the improvement is clearly the result of more effective instructional techniques.

Ideally, videotape either the same teacher or the same coach teaching both lessons to avoid comparing teachers.

Have teachers view and analyze Tape A, talking about what they observed in the lesson. Prompt them to notice aspects of the lesson that connect to your professional development focus. Then have teachers view and analyze Tape B, discussing the lesson with the same guiding questions used to analyze the first lesson. Engage them in discussion about what the teacher did in the second lesson that was more effective. After teachers view both tapes and revisit their thinking about the first lesson, they might construct a list of the features of the more effective pedagogy and create an action plan to accomplish next steps.

For example, after primary teachers in one school engaged in a book study on strategies for reading informational text, they began teaching these strategies to students in their classrooms. During my informal walk-through to see how it was going, I noticed that teachers across the grade levels were having students name text features, but they were not teaching students how to use the text features to access the information.

I asked a 2nd grade teacher for permission to videotape myself teaching her students a lesson on reading informational text using the typical practice that I had observed (Tape A). I also videotaped a lesson in which I explicitly taught 2nd grade students how to use text features to access information before, during, and after reading (Tape B).

When teachers viewed me working with 2nd graders in Tape A, I asked them to jot down what I was teaching students to do with the text features. We talked about how my instruction resembled their own teaching, and we reread sections of a chapter from our book study to brainstorm ways to improve the lesson.

The 2nd grade team was initially impressed with the wide variety of informational text features I taught students to label in Tape A. But when they saw Tape B, in which I modeled how to teach students to use the text features to access information, they erupted into conversation about Tape A's shortcomings.

## A Common Vision

The most successful schools and districts have a widely shared vision of good teaching (Wagner, 2003). By modeling lessons that make teaching and learning visible, coaches help schools build that common vision of effective instruction—a vision that serves as a road map for collaborative, job-embedded, and personalized professional development.

## References

- Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597–604.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Richardson, N. (2009). [Teacher learning: What matters?](#) *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 46–53.
- Wagner, T. (2003). Beyond testing: The seven disciplines for strengthening instruction. *Education Week*, 23(11), 28, 30.
- Wilhelm, J. D. (2001). *Improving comprehension with think-aloud strategies*. New York: Scholastic.

[Katherine Casey](#) consults with school districts across the United States in the areas of coaching, building adult learning communities, and effective instructional practices. She resides in La Mesa, California. She is the author of *Literacy Coaching: The Essentials* (Heinemann, 2006).

## KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:  
[professional development](#), [classroom observation](#), [teachers](#)

Copyright © 2011 by ASCD

## Requesting Permission

- For photocopy, electronic and online access, and republication requests, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "Get Permission" search field.
- To translate this article, contact [permissions@ascd.org](mailto:permissions@ascd.org)