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# Peer Coaching as Professional Development for Remote, Online Faculty

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## Problem

To date, much of the coaching literature focuses on work with elementary teachers in the area of literacy (for example, Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Schoniker, 2011). Very little research regarding faculty coaching at the university level has been conducted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that coaching is beneficial to higher education faculty and that those who engage in coaching are more confident in their teaching (McDowell, Bedford & DiTommaso Downs, 2014). However, no empirical evidence exists to support this, nor is there data to indicate the extent to which pedagogical struggles learned in coaching are transferred to the classroom.

## Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine how the coaching process assists faculty members in their ability to provide high quality instruction to students through increased confidence and their ability to apply pedagogical strategies discussed in the coaching session.

## Research Question

- How does the Walden coaching process assist faculty members in their ability to provide high quality instruction to students?
- How do Walden faculty describe their confidence and ability to apply pedagogical strategies post-coaching?

## Theoretical Framework

The original stage for coaching had roots set by our psychology forefathers and has evolved and grown into its own separate branch in recent decades. The theoretical framework for the current study is situated cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Situated cognition proposes that learning is embedded within the context of the situation and is dependent upon interaction. Learning occurs through a cognitive apprenticeship model in which the participants discuss, share knowledge, and collaboratively problem solve.

## Acknowledgements

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## Relevant Scholarship

Coaching can provide internal and psychological motivation of individual faculty members, which results in higher quality outcomes (Cox, 2012).

Faculty require access to professional development opportunities that provide timely and relevant support for instructional concerns (Bonura, Bissell, & Liljegen, 2012).

Investing in professional development such as coaching, which is specifically designed to address the learning challenges of the remote faculty member, facilitates building both individual and collective capacities. It also provides opportunities to cultivate relationships and share knowledge regardless of distance and how employees are dispersed (Lewis & Ewing, 2016).

Self-reflection and peer feedback strategies are effective techniques for continuous instructional improvement (Garcia, James, Bischof, & Baroffio, 2017).

Satisfaction with faculty development programs across higher education is high, particularly in voluntary programs. Faculty report positive changes in attitudes, increased knowledge/skills, and improved behavior following participation in a faculty development opportunity (Steinert, 2017).

Coaching facilitates the development of collaborative partnership and relationships. This provides for more positive learning environments and higher satisfaction with outcomes on the part of participants (Passmore & Rehman; 2012).

Coaching allows the faculty member to address individual goals and have a voice in their own learning through reflection and feedback—practices which are all critical to change (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Schoniker, 2011).

## Significance & Social Change Implications

Much of the coaching research has been conducted in k-12 educational and face-to-face environments. Results are positive and those who have participated in coaching report increased morale, high-quality collaborations, and an emphasis on proven pedagogical practices (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Coaching research with faculty in higher education, online environments, could provide insight into the transferability of these findings to professional outcomes in this environment and situate coaching as an innovative alternative to a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Schoniker, 2011).

## Participants

Active Walden faculty members who participated in at least one coaching session with a faculty specialist from May, 2011 to December 2016 were invited to participate. Sixteen faculty members agreed to a 60-minute focus group session. Two faculty specialists who deliver coaching services were also interviewed and an analysis of the coaching database was conducted.

## Procedures

Data were collected through focus groups with faculty coaching participants and were triangulated with propositional data that included questionnaires completed by the coaches and coaching registration data. Virtual focus groups were conducted using collaboration software that allowed for video sharing, written chat, and recorded/transcribed audio. Four focus groups were conducted over a one-month period of time. Each focus group lasted between forty and sixty minutes and included one to six participants for a total of sixteen participants. The two faculty specialists completed questionnaires and the coaching database was examined to triangulate the data from the focus groups.

## Analysis

Initial coding was conducted by one of the members of the research team through a process of inductive analysis of the raw data that included the interviews and questionnaires. Once the initial coding was complete, the researcher categorized the individual comments and concepts into units. Finally, another researcher reviewed and confirmed findings to ensure that the diverse perspectives of the group were represented. She also compared findings of the focus groups to the faculty specialist questionnaire data to identify both consistent and divergent themes. The coaching database data were also used to triangulate themes that included number of coaching sessions with participants, assigned coach, and coaching topic.

## Findings

Data analysis resulted in four themes: *Affirmation of Current Practices, Shared Expectations for the Coaching Session, The Importance of Institutional Relationships, and Teaching Support*. Affirmation of current practices grew out of conversation around outcomes associated with enhanced positive feelings and included codes such as confirmation, confidence, guidance and increased motivation. Shared expectations for coaching sessions emerged as a theme that described the structure and outcomes expected of participants as well as those understood by the coaches. The theme, institutional relationships, centered on the participants' purpose for seeking coaching and triangulated with the coaches' responses related to their professional motivation. Finally, teaching support emerged as a theme that described specific content outcomes that faculty participants described as strategies and tools that supported their work with students.

## Interpretation

Findings from the qualitative study indicated that coaching is an effective approach to provide information and instructional support to faculty. It may be an appropriate service for individuals who need individualized support – particularly for remote faculty and may lead to increased confidence and feelings of belonging within the University (McDowell, Bedford & DiTommaso Downs, 2014). Unanticipated benefits include affirmation of current practices, an opportunity to build relationships within the University, and creation of shared expectations for performance. These unanticipated outcomes appeared, at times, to be of more importance to participants than receiving answers to their instructional questions.

## Recommendations

Because of the success of the of the program and research findings, additional opportunities for faculty coaching have been and continue to be considered. To support these specific audiences, colleagues from across the University with experience, expertise, and an in-depth understanding of faculty needs may be leveraged to provide coaching services. Additional research is needed to identify knowledge transfer and ROI for the coaching program.