

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning Professor

Coaching and Teaching

James Rhem, executive editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum (NT&LF)*

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Perhaps because I've never been a natural athlete and never been on an athletic team, I've always hated the idea of coaches. I still feel strong visceral contempt when, in a movie or play, a young athlete in conversation with his family says something like, "Coach says . . ." Dropping the definite article represents a sure sign of cultish devotion, unwarranted Rasputinesque influence and the end of independent thinking. In my mind it's "the coach" or you're an idiot. But then one of your closest friends sends you an article from the *New Yorker* and you begin to reflect on the effectiveness of the best teaching you've had and even such powerful attitudes can soften as a deeper understanding of coaching takes hold.

To let myself off the hook a bit, I think I've always been inclined toward learning through coaching, but simply had a deep prejudice against the word. That, of course, also meant I maintained a powerful barrier against learning what might lie behind mindfully reflecting on the word and where those reflections might lead. For example, when I was invited to go to Saudi Arabia and speak in September, I was given a choice of keynote topics — the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or Peer Observation. I snapped up Peer Observation as something I knew to be worthwhile and of direct benefit to teaching faculty, whereas, though SoTL might foster reflection and lead to better teaching, I'd found most of it to be as thin as French veneer without any of its elegance. Way back in the 1970s as a TA I'd agitated to have myself videotaped and persuaded faculty to review the tapes with me at a time when neither was standard procedure and videotaping was a cumbersome affair. So, I guess I've believed in coaching all along. I've just had a chip on my shoulder about coaches.

The article my friend sent me — "Personal Best" by Atul Gawande, appeared in the October 3 issue of the *New Yorker* in the "Annals of Medicine" department. Gawande is a surgeon and an associate professor of medicine and public health at Harvard and author of the recent book *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*. Nearing his mid-forties, Gawande began to wonder if his skills as a surgeon were as good as they were ever going to get. His rates of postsurgical complication had steadily declined as he'd gained experience, but they'd hit a plateau. Then, on vacation, he happened to spend an unexpected hour with a tennis pro whose few comments ended up improving Gawande's serve significantly even though he had thought his serve was the strongest part of his game. That started Gawande on the course of investigation and reflection that led to writing the article. He recounts how coaching was seen as unsporting in nineteenth-century Britain (an attitude beautifully dramatized in the film "Chariots of Fire" about the 1924 Olympics) and how its embrace in America led to consistent victories on athletic fields. He then inquired and discovered that top musicians like violinist Itzhak Perlman and soprano Renee Fleming have trusted coaches continually acting as their second, seasoned pairs of eyes and ears helping them see and hear their performances and where their strengths and weaknesses lie. This initially surprised Gawande. He'd assumed top musicians operated as most doctors (and most faculty) do: once graduated they go on alone and untutored.

Eventually, Gawande's investigation led him to Jim Knight, director of the Kansas Coaching Project at the

University of Kansas. I'm compressing a fine piece of writing I hope you'll seek out and read for yourself, but I want to expose you to some of Gawande's most provocative findings. Through Knight, Gawande became familiar with research on teacher-skill development done in 80 schools in the 1980s that more than supports the idea that coaching may be the best way to improve teaching. That research found that workshops inspired teachers to make improvements in their teaching only 10% of the time whereas coaching about the same skills led teachers to adopt the changes in more than 90% of the cases. Moreover, the coached teachers were more effective and their students did better on tests.

The open question at this point was what makes for good coaching, since clearly all coaches aren't effective. To explore the question Knight agreed to let Gawande sit in on work being done with teachers in Albermarle County, Virginia. Let me skip the ins and outs of the program there and jump to the post-class session between coaches and the eighth-grade algebra teacher visited, Jennie Critzer. The lesson that day had been about simplifying radicals — the square roots of 36 and 32 to begin with.

She'd done well. Gawande didn't see how she could have done better. She'd had students visualize, verbalize, and write out their ideas. She'd shown good command of "learning structures" — lecturing, problem-solving, cooperative learning, discussion. But the coaches said that every teacher has something to work on. In this case they'd noticed that of the 20 students, four had seemed at sea. How might she have reached them?

Coaching about the class, however, did not begin with that question. It began with the question: "What worked?" Critzer, an experienced teacher who simply wants to improve, had a good sense of what she'd done well and anticipated the next question regarding what didn't go well. She had a sense of what needed attention there too — the students who were adrift and "not getting it." So the conversation immediately became one about what she might do to reach them. Critzer quickly thought she might need to break the concepts down more. Coaches prompted further thought about what else she might do, which led to her thinking about how a previous class had been livelier, more verbal. This connected with an observation the coaches had made that boy-girl pairs had had difficulty with their math conversation working on problems. And so the question then became how to help them become more verbal.

All of this underscores a key modality of effective coaching — conversation. Effective coaching depends on setting aside status and making the matter at hand — improved teaching — the only concern. They speak with credibility, as Gawande points out, but while credibility involves "authority," it also transcends it. We don't always believe authorities. Belief relies on trust and trust, of course, involves a willing vulnerability, an exposure of self to criticism. It is an inherently intimate relationship not everyone is willing to embrace. So, coaching, properly understood and executed, is not the repellant surrender of identity I'd long associated with athletics, not the shouting, cretinous commands of bullnecked former football stars. Gawande maintains that coaching differs from teaching, but reading his exploration of good coaching, it seems to me as though coaching is teaching at its very best.

The piece ends with Gawande making that embrace by inviting a trusted retired surgeon, one of his former teachers, to come and observe some of his surgeries. The experience took me back to peer observation and what willing faculty might learn from it, and to "Lesson Study" of the kind Bill Cerbin describes in his recent book. Most of Gawande's surgeries went well; one did not. He learned a great deal, he reports, from both experiences.

One of the other presenters at the forum in Saudi Arabia was a colleague from Scotland. That inspired

me to end my keynote on Peer Observation with a quote from Robert Burns's "To a Louse," which I vaingloriously delivered in a fine Scottish brogue: "O would some power the giftie give us to see ourselves as others see us." Rhetorically, it was a flop, but the point is a good one; we need others to help us see how we're doing and how we might do better. But they need to be people we fully trust, who care about the same things we do. It turns out, that such people are all around us if we will only reach out to them. As Steve Barkley says in one of the videos on the Kansas Coaching Project website, "Coaching really isn't an activity; it's a culture." Belief, trust, common interest: these are the economy. Insights, improvement, personal fulfillment: these are the profits to be shared.

Atul Gawande's "Personal Best": http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/10/03/111003fa_fact_gawande

Jim Knight's blog: <http://www.radicallearners.com/>

The Kansas Coaching Project: <http://www.instructionalcoach.org/>

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