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The calm within the storm

The UK's Further Education and Skills sector is facing major upheavals. Yet coaching has turned out to be a calming influence, suggests an evaluation study from the Learning and Skills Improvement Service. **Eve Turner** reports

It is a time of huge challenge and change in the UK's Further Education and Skills sector: changes of leadership, mergers, restructuring, redundancies and different and reduced sources of funding. Given the latter, can coaching really make a difference? The answer is yes, a large-scale evaluation study has revealed.

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) is the UK's sector-led body that supports further education and sixth form colleges, adult and community learning, work-based learning providers and offender learning to excel in this challenging context. It turned its spotlight on coaching to assess whether it can really contribute here, particularly when funding is so tight.

In spring 2012, LSIS carried out a quantitative and qualitative study to assess the impact of its one-to-one coaching and its programmes highlighting coaching as a leadership style – ranging from specific accredited coach training and regional workshops, to dealing with tough, change conversations.

Hugely positive

All respondents had contact with LSIS. Most had either received coaching or attended a programme or workshop. Two-thirds said they were delivering coaching internally. Written comments led to follow-up studies.

The survey and case studies clearly show that coaching has had a hugely positive impact, bringing calm to the sector in the midst of gruelling and rapid change.

It provides the support and clarity of thinking needed to help learning providers thrive, making a difference to leadership, organisations and the classroom, for example, through:

- Improved ratings from OFSTED (the UK's body for inspecting schools)
- Improved teacher lesson observation grades
- Improved target setting by students
- Improved morale
- Changing culture

The quantitative results are very encouraging for coaching. One hundred per cent of respondents

thought coaching was at least as effective as any other change intervention, and 87 per cent thought it had considerably more impact. It was also seen to have a direct, very positive impact on teaching and learning as well as on leadership and management. There was widespread evidence of its use internally.

Margaret Adjaye, LSIS's head of quality and equalities, says: "The survey has highlighted the positive impact coaching is having on the sector and the demand for cost-effective internally delivered

Case study

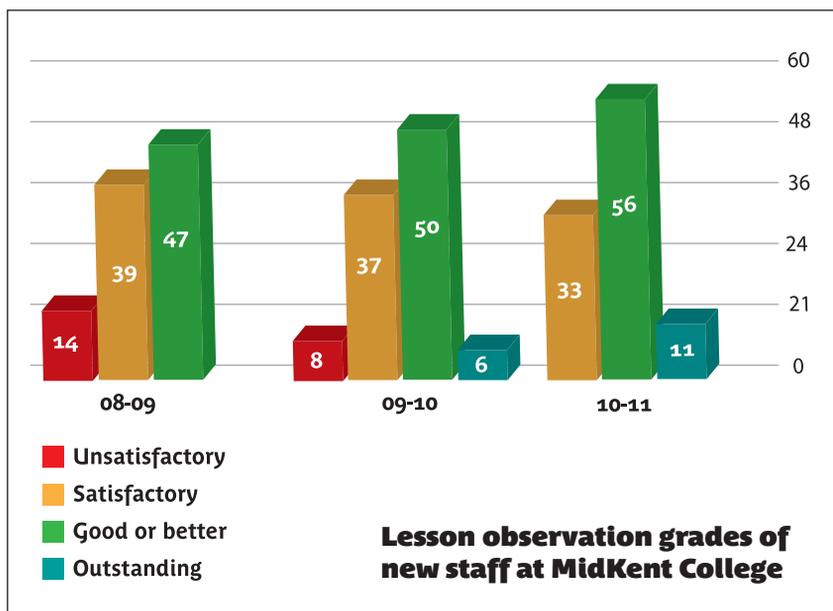
Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology: Learner target setting using a coaching approach

Coaching is being used to help gain Investors in People status at the college. It was referred to positively by the college's OFSTED lead inspector in November 2011: "The college continues to invest in resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and staff speak highly of the team of advanced learning coaches and the range of development activity provided."

Following the inspection, a coaching approach has been embedded into a strategic action plan with the aim of moving the college from a grade 3 (Satisfactory) to a grade 2 (Good). The inspector noted observation grades and target settings as areas to develop and the college is piloting the use of the solutions-focus OSKAR model it learned on LSIS's Advanced Coaching Programme to achieve more effective target setting and improve learning outcomes.

Sandra Stansfield, an LSIS trained coach, placed large numbers across a wall and on the floor and encouraged students to decide on their target, where they were on the scale, and support each other in asking questions about how they would move forward. Stansfield and her colleague Jane Martin also demonstrated the model to other teachers and the college's PGCE students. The students' feedback is very positive:

- "I liked how you showed that setting targets can be a fun thing to do instead of a horrendous nightmare that nobody wants to experience"
- "I believe that using the new process, I'll be more successful by setting smaller and more realistic goals to reach the next step"
- "I feel more confident and organised"



Top: Tony Marsh, Vanessa Kent and Ellie Bentley, MidKent College; above: the students enjoyed using OSKAR

coaching. Even in a difficult economic climate, the sector has sought to embrace coaching and has found that it delivers results.”

This explains why the senior leadership team at Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology has just agreed permanent funding to both train coaches and give them time remission to carry it out.

Fundamental changes

Jane Martin, one of the coaches there, describes it as: “Transformational. It really did open up a different way of interacting and communicating with people and improving practice. It has brought about all sorts of fundamental changes.”

This is borne out by Sharon Collett, vice principal (academic and student affairs) at the Bournemouth and Poole College, where the senior leadership team were all given LSIS coaches. Despite the challenging financial background, Collett argues that this has been money well spent, helping her use a coaching approach that has led to an improved experience for the students. “The cost of a college not being effective is extremely high, so the investment in the senior leaders is

critical; it will help us to use particular approaches, to manage the continual change that is required. And I think that the staff and students in the college deserve to have strong leaders who are keen to keep developing. Only in that way can we get the college to provide everything we want it to in the community.”

Innovative approach

MidKent College has been very innovative in its use of coaching approaches and techniques, from the OSKAR model to the Wheel of Change, from cards to motivational dialogue with staff and students. Their work illustrates the positive effect in the classroom. Two of the ten internal coaches, Vanessa Kent and Ellie

Bentley, describe the work of the coaching team as having a considerable impact on improved lesson observation grades. The number of new staff at MidKent achieving a good or outstanding lesson observation grade increased from 47 per cent in 2008-09 to 67 per cent in 2010-11 (see top left).

A clear improvement in this area is also seen at Shrewsbury College with 80 per cent of those who have been coached, individually or in groups, increasing their grade. For those who had not received coaching, the improvement was just below 7 per cent. Birkenhead Sixth Form College also highlight an improvement in observation grades, along with some improvements in student performance.

Key findings

- Coaching has a considerably more positive impact on change than any other developmental intervention (87 per cent)
- Coaching has a significant impact on teaching and learning (65 per cent)
- Coaching has a significant impact on leadership and management (74 per cent)
- Respondents providing coaching internally (66 per cent)
- Respondents who want to take a higher level coaching qualification (57 per cent)

Number of participants: 178