

An Artist Needs Inspiration but An Expert Needs Coaching

Why Teaching has More in Common with Surgery and Sport than Composing or Painting

By: Bradley Williams

Michelangelo or Gupta, Swift or Jordan, Banksy or Woods? All are widely considered to be the best at what they do. For these individuals, there were two paths to greatness, each was paved with tenacity and practice. But these two paths couldn't be more different.

The artists walked the path of inspiration. With knowledge, skill, creativity and wonder, they created. Their path was winding with success and failure resting in the eye of the beholder. Each mile would produce a masterpiece or a forgotten work. The artist walks alone to greatness as they value their own way. Some agree their work is incredible, while others call it noise or graffiti. For the artist, the path is a journey that is as important as the finished piece. The way each creation came to be is as important as the product.

The experts walked the path of coaching. With knowledge and skill, methods and tools, they achieved. Their path was straight with success and failure always clearly discernable. Each mile would improve and hone their skill. The expert walks with a coach to greatness as they value the most effective way. Everyone agrees that their work is incredible because it can be measured and repeated time and again. For the expert, the path is a means to an end. The way they get there is less important than the outcomes they achieve.

A teacher approaches a fork in the road. Which path do they walk? Do they stand alone trying to find a way to weave their curriculum and resources into a beautiful tapestry that hopefully some of the students will find appealing? Or do they stand with a coach, working together to implement methods that consistently succeed across every classroom for as many students as possible? If the outcome of the lesson is more important than the lesson itself... If learning and growth take precedent... There is only one viable path – the path of the expert.



You see three blades. An expert surgeon sees three distinct solutions. You think that they all could be used to cut into flesh. An expert surgeon would never consider interchanging their use. The patient doesn't care about how excited the surgeon is to finally need the #12 blade. The surgeon doesn't care which scalpel the patient would prefer. The patient only wants to be fixed and the surgeon wants to fix, as quickly and successfully as possible.



A duffer stands at the base of this hazard. She knows that one of three clubs might do. She chooses one, swings and hopes. She is successful and sinks the shot, but if you were to lay 10 balls side by side, she couldn't make that shot again. The pro golfer considers the height, the breeze, the speed and size of the green. Only one club will do. She is successful and sinks the shot, and if you were to lay down 10 balls side by side, she would make that shot again more times than not.

As a teacher, we must choose our questions as carefully as the surgeon picks his blade or the golfer picks her club. It is true that either of these experts may be able to predict which they will use at the outset of a procedure or a hole, but the expert adjusts in real time, not only by choosing each tool based on how they have done it before but based on list of constantly changing variables. A surgeon would be expected to be able to say why they chose that specific blade to make that specific incision. The golfer could clearly articulate the same for each club and stroke. Should a teacher be able to articulate in real-time why they asked that specific question to that specific student? Might they say that they were sticking to the plan? Or would they say that it just came to them...naturally?

In every classroom, students with varying needs get one, year-long chance to learn the content and skills necessary to be successful each subsequent year. They want to have fun. They want to love learning, but most of all they want to be successful. All teachers can build relationships, problem solve creatively and motivate their students. But the expert teacher finds the ultimate satisfaction in student growth, in curing the disease, in sinking the putt. And to do that, like all experts, they will need the help of a coach. They need an extra set of eyes that point out when things are going well, and how they might become even more effective. They will need a coach who tells them when to cut a little lower, swing a little softer or ask a slightly different question to meet the needs of every student, not someday but today.

So as a coach, where can we start? What can we do today to hone a teacher's skills in a way that directly impacts student growth? How can we identify effective practices that should be replicated? And how can we do it with even our most skilled teachers?

Let's start by treating our teachers like the experts that they strive to be. Let's set the expectation that everything they do with every student should be deliberate and intentional. Let's treat them like surgeons and golfers.

- 1. Choose a skilled teacher.**
- 2. Tell them that because of their current level of skill, you would like to watch them teach, but**

that you would like to better understand how they make decisions during their instruction.

- 3. Ask them to narrate to you as they are teaching. You want to hear why they are making their decisions as they make them.**

Provide these possible frames prior to the lesson:

- So that I can ____, I will ____.
 - I noticed that ____, So I ____.
 - Since I want ____, I'll ask ____.
- Etc.

- 4. Prepare index cards with the following stems. Take them with you to the lesson but do not provide them ahead of time.**

- Since ____ is an English learner, I will ____.
- Since ____ is struggling, I will ____.
- Since ____ has shown mastery, I will ____.

- 5. When you see one of these three situations present themselves, discreetly pass the appropriate card to the teacher, smile and say, "Explain this one to me."**

- 6. Create new frames to address observable skill and equity factors as you see aspects of the lesson of which you would like to hear the intentionality behind the specific behavior.**

You have just utilized a simplistic form of *Full-Bore Introspection (FBI)*, one of the eight methods of Performance-Based Coaching™. This method is designed to help even the most skilled teachers improve instruction by identifying specific behaviors that have become habitual and that cannot be rationalized during instruction. Any teacher behavior that cannot be easily rationalized or addressed becomes a teacher-identified target for co-planning/co-teaching and the target of their subsequent Performance-Based Coaching cycle™.

For more information about the purpose and implementation of this powerful coaching method as well as the seven other methods of Performance-Based Coaching™, watch for our weekly coaching and leadership tips or pick up our newly released book from our website.