**Teacher Andrew Jones explains the difference between coaching and mentoring, and how they suit different professional development needs**

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Most teachers have been mentored at some point in their career – whether as a PGCE student, a newly qualified teacher (NQT) or after a promotion. Not many of us can say we have been "coached", however. In fact, few of us would be able to give a clear definition or comparison of the two.

Coaching has become a buzzword in education over recent years and there are now numerous organisations promoting it in schools. Many training providers have cottoned on to this method of professional development, which [has its roots in business leadership](http://www.brefigroup.co.uk/coaching/coaching_and_mentoring.html) and as a psychological approach to performance in sport.

So, what is the [difference between mentoring and coaching and how do they differ in teaching practice](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/news/documents/5414_CfT_FINALWeb.pdf)? In a nutshell, mentoring is a way of managing career transition whereas coaching is used whenever an individual feels the need to evaluate their professional capabilities, allowing for genuine continuous professional development (CPD).

Mentoring is a supportive, long-term relationship between an experienced mentor and their less experienced mentee. The idea is that the more senior mentor passes on knowledge and guidance as the mentee finds their feet in a new role.

In state education, mentoring is often structured around fulfilling standards, such as performance management targets, which provides plenty of documentary evidence of the mentoring and its outcomes. The process ends when the mentee is confident or capable enough to carry on with their duties without oversight.

Coaching, on the other hand, consists of peer-to-peer discussions that provide the person being coached with objective feedback on their strengths and weaknesses in areas chosen by them. While discussion is led by the coach, they ask questions that allow the professional seeking advice to reflect on their practice and set their own goals for improvement. This is the opposite of mentoring as the coach does not evaluate, judge or set targets, and the person being coached is in full control of the discussion. Unlike mentoring, coaching also gives the recipient more say on the direction of their professional development and encourages them to take more ownership of their CPD.

My experience of coaching has been extremely positive. Although sceptical, perhaps even cynical, at first, I have taken part in an extensive training programme on coaching led by my school's lead performance coach. Coaching requires hours of practice and observation by the trainer, as well as learning about the theory and practice. Within my training cohort, I coached and was coached by a number of colleagues, from experienced teachers to PGCE students.

The best thing about it was that it gave me the freedom to discuss my needs and wants openly; I wasn't self-conscious when assessing my strengths and weaknesses and had a chance to properly think about the direction I want my career to go in. My colleagues who coached me kept the conversation focused, realistic and effective. Interestingly, some of the most productive sessions came from being paired up with colleagues in very different roles, such as the site manager. It was also important that my coach was not line managing or hierarchically senior to me to facilitate an open and confidential warts-and-all discussion.

That doesn't mean coaching should be based on informal chats, however. It requires adequate training – giving objective feedback can be hard for the inexperienced.A coach has to be aware of their own views and any prejudices or preconceptions they might have about the person they're helping. Theory, training and practice is needed so that you're mindful of the nuances of language and can control any temptation to be judgemental.

Although mentoring remains an essential component of career development, especially when moving onto a new role or when assessing performance management, coaching can be a useful tool for encouraging an individual to take ownership of their own career path. It's the ability to take ownership of CPD that really separates coaching from mentoring.

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