

I coach from a theoretical base, from a well of beliefs about how people learn. Do I mess up and sometimes act contradictory to my beliefs? Oh, yeah. But that sends me back to my core beliefs, or I realize it's time to expand them. Here's what I believe, do, or know as a coach:

1) I tell stories about being "coached." My dad, my diving coach, saw the best in everyone he taught. His early death influenced me in many ways as an educator. My high school synchronized swimming coach drove our team to a college-level candlelit synchro show. A priest paid me five dollars *in advance* for my first long-term performing "gig" when I was only nine. I tell stories of teachers who shut down my learning as well. Early on I vowed never to put a student down to make myself look good. I'm full of tales about how I want and don't want to teach, and I encourage students to remember moments of learning and failing to learn.

2) I put the teller in charge of his or her coaching session. I'm more follower than leader. I check in regularly – is this helpful? Would you like appreciations/suggestions now? I watch for clues. If the teller wants to speak, I follow her lead. Does this feel like a place to stop? Is there anything else you want from me/us?

3) I must believe in every teller. This is essential. Tellers will doubt themselves enough without my doubting their potential. My father saw that some divers were more naturally skilled than others. He still told every diver, "You can do it!" We learned we could succeed at any dive, *if* we just kept at it. His job was to do his best to see we didn't give up. Some coaches care more about numbers of wins and quality of play than about players. I have very high standards, but the people I coach matter more than my standards. If I send someone away discouraged, I haven't coached well.

And I want my storytellers to be better humans because of the stories they hear and tell. Our work isn't just about skill; it's about how we live our lives and treat each other. The world desperately needs stories. We need tales, and we need each other. I want my students to realize stories heal and instruct as well as entertain. Good stories help us be more generous, brave, kind and resourceful. They nudge us to laugh at ourselves and to wise up. I want to keep tellers telling - for their listeners and for themselves. I do that by believing in them.

4) I regularly remind myself there is *no right way* to tell any story. Some tellers are entertaining. Some quietly engaging. Some are loud and dramatic. Others casual, even goofy. There is an infinite number of ways. My job is to help the teller find his or her own unique way. That means getting out of the director's chair, and becoming the investigator.

5) I find out how to help through deep listening. I listen wholeheartedly. I nod, laugh and grimace. I offer what Pam McGrath calls "a juicy face." I wait out a long pause with relaxed patience. I know even experienced tellers, working with a new tale, struggle to capture an image in words. I look and listen for the nuances of a teller's style. When anyone is listened to deeply, he is more likely to give that gift to others. Children of every age listen well, given regular opportunities to practice. Beyond the story, I know how to help the teller by listening to why she's chosen *this* tale or what he wants from *this* coaching. Is it a new tale or one that may have gotten stale? Does the teller have a good sense of her strengths? What does he think

needs improvement? When I listen well, I hear many things. As a coach, I focus on the teller's hopes for the tale. Does this take time? Yes. But when I just give quick tips, I'm more copyeditor than coach.

6) In any group, I teach the art of peer-coaching. I invite students to accept the stance of "coach" because it will develop the witness within. Storytelling artfully and coaching someone else are both about noticing. Evaluating what works or doesn't is an aspect of coaching, but I want peer-coaches to expand their thinking about how a story might be told, not narrow it to a way they think it should be told.

When coaching is *for the sake of the teller* it accomplishes the most. The coach's job becomes freeing the teller's best thinking both at the moment and in the future. It's never simply a matter of polishing the tale into the coach thinks is good. Like believing in the teller's success, listening with the teller's goals and creativity in mind is a stance the coach takes again and again. I encourage peer-coaches to take an observing, not a judging posture. They want to ask themselves what is the teller doing or trying to achieve? Then their responses will come from a place of curiosity rather than direction.

Inexperienced coaches get distracted from deep listening by the tale they want to tell or by some incident or emotion a tale brings up. As audience members, this is exactly what a listener does. Storytelling's job is to take listeners into themselves. But, as *coaches*, while we may be moved or entertained, we make the decision to listen primarily for the teller's sake. Then we ask what will help the teller discover his or her unique way to tell this tale?

7) I teach tellers of every age to find a balance between listening to themselves and to others. The world's voices, often harsh and critical, can lure us away from our best thinking and our original goals as both artists and coaches.

I introduce metacognition to both tellers and peer coaches. Metacognition involves talking or writing about one's thinking. I ask tellers to think: What has been rewarding or difficult as I've told or as I've accepted and given feedback? Why did I pick *this* tale? How did I work on it? How has my thinking changed *in process*? What do I love about this tale? What do I want listeners to take away? I require both tellers and peer-coaches to be reflective, to listen to themselves.

8) I always begin feedback by offering unadulterated appreciations - purposeful, specific positives - unmixed with suggestions or questions. Not just to be nice. I want a teller to recognize what is skillful in storytelling. Often we are unconscious of our skillfulness, our unique talents as artists. I want tellers to know their strengths and build on them.

I keep appreciations "clean" or separate from other feedback because I want the teller to really let them in. Not be braced for the "but" to follow. I want the teller to hear what works well, what is fresh, what is worth keeping, before making changes. I name what moves me and what strikes me as unique. "Your little girl voice sounds authentic. I can see the character of the five-year-old you." "Your sound effect helped me imagine that bird." "You have a unique way of sliding an image our way then leaning on a word or phrase so the image sticks in our minds."

Appreciations can influence a teller adversely, make her want to please, more than follow her own creative instincts. I name that problem for my students. Yet, I know few tellers see their strengths or accept them as pluses. What takes no effort seems trivial or as something to avoid. Doug Lipman says we often call our

strengths “That old thing? Why I’ve always been able to do that.” or “*That* has gotten me into trouble!” Confidence results in claiming our strengths as artists and taking the risk to try new skills.

Sometimes it seems as if criticizing ourselves and each other is the job. I’ve seen far too many children and adults unwilling to accept appreciations. Yet they are easily disillusioned when “suggestions” fly. “Constructive criticisms” aren’t constructive when they shut a teller down. Appreciations are only one aspect of coaching, but they are important because they illuminate what is skillful. I encourage tellers to let appreciations all the way in, to ride their energy. After every good appreciation my brain works better. I feel safe and relax into the thrilling, often terrifying work, of creating. Any kind of feedback should leave the teller excited to make changes or to move forward in some way. A successful coaching session stirs the artist’s creative juices. A dejected teller rarely improves.

9) Questions are the most valuable form of suggestion. I ask what I am truly curious about, what I want to understand more fully or see more clearly. I rarely ask a question to be silly (although I’ve done this to loosen up a stiff teller). I’m never sarcastic. I limit the focus and number of questions so the teller leaves with key things to think about as he revises. A laundry list of things to change is rarely helpful unless I am with advanced storytellers who ask for director-like “notes.” A few good questions help a teller imagine possibilities for a story’s growth. My questions help young tellers learn how to ask themselves questions or ask questions of the tale.

10) Lastly, suggestions. We are all raised to think of feedback as direction. In my career suggestion and direction have been the LEAST helpful kinds of feedback. I am creative. I trust I will find my own best way to solve any problem. I do need help recognizing problems, but mostly what I need is true listening. A good listener or room full of story-lovers makes my creative juices flow. Then I need to know “so what worked, what lived?” and “Were you bugged by anything or uncertain of my meaning at any point?” When I do offer anyone suggestions, they often come in the form of “Want to try something?” If the teller says no, I let go. If the teller is willing, I offer a posture change or voice variation or word emphasis – something that helps the teller experiment. Then I trust the nudge will help her find her *own* way.