

“It Takes Two to Tango”: Power Dynamics in Researcher-Coach Collaborations

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Abstract: Effective researcher-coach relationships need reciprocal learning, which allows practitioners to share valuable contextual knowledge while researchers share evidence-based ideas. Nevertheless, these collaborations encounter obstacles due to power imbalances, which frequently establish researchers as authorities and reduce the role of practitioners as co-creators. Therefore, this study examines power dynamics in researcher-coach partnerships within educational contexts, emphasizing equitable collaboration strategies. Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a framework, this study analyzes video data from a writing intensive to explore interactions between two participants, Ashley and Russell. Findings reveal that initial tensions foster deeper understanding through negotiated power exchanges. The study underscores that openness, mutual trust, and reflective dialogue are essential for sustainable partnerships, advancing the understanding of power dynamics in researcher-coach collaborations.

Introduction and theoretical framework

Research on researcher-practitioner interactions has examined how researchers help educators use transformative teaching to improve student engagement and outcomes. However, this focus often prevents researchers from reflecting on their roles and contributions in collaborative procedures. Collaborative learning has the potential to enhance research-practitioner partnerships by deepening comprehension of the social, structural, and contextual factors influencing education. Such exchange gives practitioners research-based insights and researchers a grounded understanding of education. These collaborations must involve practitioners' perspectives and experience due to the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive education methods. Researcher-practitioner pairs often struggle owing to power imbalances. Practitioners may consider themselves as implementers rather than co-creators because researchers are seen as authoritative. This study examines how researcher-coach pairs perceive and manage power dynamics to promote fairness and cooperation. Particularly, we ask: *In what ways are power dynamics navigated within researcher-coach collaborations to foster trust and cooperative relationships?*

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is an analytical framework that explores how human action, and learning occurs in socially situated activity (Engeström, 2001; Engeström & Sannino 2020). Activity in CHAT is defined as collective action directed toward a shared object or set of overarching goals. This activity is further assumed to be mediated, or enabled and transformed, by the shared object, the artifacts or tools in the activity system, the community, and the rules and division of labor that shape how participants, often referred to as the subjects, interact. Within this framework, multiple activity systems can interact in various ways, often producing new tools, rules, and objectives for one another (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This paper will focus on the rules that govern, dictate, and constrain participant interactions within our professional learning activity system, along with the division of labor, including how tasks are divided within the community and reflect emergent power dynamics.

Coach - Researcher collaborations and power dynamics

Coaching plays a crucial role in effective teacher professional learning (TPL), which is defined by its ability to improve teaching practices and enhance student success (Penuel et al., 2007). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identified seven key elements of TPL that are linked to positive student outcomes, including content engagement,

active learning, collegial collaboration, coaching, feedback, and sustained duration. Among these, coaching stands out as a particularly effective method for promoting teaching changes and supporting student achievement. It also complements the other essential elements, reinforcing their impact (Trust et al., 2017; Penuel et al., 2007). The role of researcher and coach collaborations in improving these professional learning outcomes further underscores the importance of understanding how such partnerships can enhance teacher development.

Historically, research on teacher professional learning has focused primarily on what and how teachers learn, often overlooking the influence of researchers' practices within these collaborations (Ko et al., 2022). Researchers may fail to engage in reflexive practices, thus limiting their ability to fully consider how their contributions affect outcomes (Lezotte et al., 2022; Goldman et al., 2022). Successful researcher-coach partnerships depend on equitable relationships where both parties share expertise and work toward common goals. However, power dynamics can undermine these partnerships, as researchers often hold perceived authority, which may lead coaches to adopt passive roles in decision-making (Teeters & Jurow, 2018; Farrell et al., 2019). To maximize the effectiveness of these collaborations, it is essential to empower coaches to actively contribute their expertise, especially regarding classroom culture and pedagogical challenges (Henderson et al., 2020; Kyza & Agasilaou, 2022).

Method

Design of the HEOV project

The *Hearing Each Other's Voices* (HEOV) project connects STEM coaches and researchers to collaboratively address practical and research-based challenges, bridging the gap between innovative research and sustainable educational practices. This partnership offers professional learning opportunities that facilitate the translation between research and practice, combining researchers' broad field insights with practitioners' real-world experiences. Grounded in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the project employs a two-phase model to build trusting relationships while examining both material and social aspects of learning. STEM coaches were recruited from a network of over 600 Title I schools across the United States, specifically those focused on science and technology, while researchers were selected from multidisciplinary backgrounds to align with the diverse interests and needs of the STEM coaches. In its first year, HEOV included six participants, with a preliminary focus on Russell and Ashley, whose balanced and mutually respectful relationship provided a compelling case for analyzing how such dynamics emerge in interaction.

Data Collection and analysis

Video data for this study was collected during a two-day professional learning event, the Writing-Intensive, which combined structured writing sessions with informal activities to foster collaboration and produce a shared research-practice brief on a relevant problem of practice. These sessions facilitated idea exchange through pre-planned reflective questions, helping participants build a shared understanding of their contexts and articulate specific issues for collaborative exploration. Approximately 20 hours of video data were recorded, focusing on researcher-practitioner pairs, with content logs highlighting episodes where power dynamics were negotiated. Guided by emerging impressions of shifting power relations, key moments in the development of trust and support were identified. Interaction Analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) was used to examine how Ashley and Russell indicated and adapted to their perceived power dynamics through verbal and non-verbal cues. Their feedback was then sought to refine the analysis.

Findings

To illustrate the shifting perceptions of power in the focus partnership, we identified three distinct episodes that illustrate these shifts, named circling, the meeting, and the dance as means to reveal how power is negotiated, exchanged, and redefined between Ashley and Russell. Our preliminary findings focus on key moments where discourse and paralinguistic cues such as body orientation, gestures, and spatial adjustments significantly impact power relations.

Episode 1: Initial roles for positions of authority and power

In Episode 1, Russell (the researcher) and Ashley (the coach) navigate a discussion on priorities and document creation, aiming to define their shared project while establishing interactional norms. Russell initiates the conversation by acknowledging Ashley's insights, using expressive gestures and an engaged posture to foster collaboration. When he questions whether the project's priority lies solely with the coach or is shared, Ashley momentarily avoids eye contact and focuses on her laptop, introducing a subtle physical and emotional distance.

The first tension emerges as Russell attempts to establish norms, subtly shifting the power dynamic by lowering his arm, possibly to ease tension and grant Ashley more control. As the discussion transitions to document creation, Ashley's widened eyes signal uncertainty about Russell's intentions, prompting him to adjust his approach through softening gestures to maintain clarity and sensitivity. The exchange concludes with Russell making a self-deprecating remark about learning more from Ashley than contributing himself, eliciting a smirk that suggests her appreciation for his recognition of her expertise. Their interaction demonstrates how verbal and non-verbal cues shape a professional dynamic based on mutual respect, balancing control, courtesy, and acknowledgment of contributions.

Episode 2: Power shifts in codesign

In this episode, Russell and Ashley engage in a collaborative discussion to set goals for a project aimed at benefiting schools. Their body language and verbal exchanges reflect a shift toward a more balanced partnership, with both actively contributing ideas and acknowledging each other's expertise. Russell begins by referencing their shared background, specifically Ashley's coursework with another scholar familiar to both. This reference signals a sense of familiarity and openness, contrasting with his earlier, more reserved demeanor. We interpret a shift in power dynamics when Russell suggests co-constructing a goal based on Ashley's insights. This suggestion narrows their focus to creating the research practice brief while encouraging Ashley's leadership. This marks a shift in their dynamic from Russell asserting his own expertise to actively valuing and incorporating Ashley's perspective. Ashley responds by turning directly to him and expressing agreement with this collaborative approach. She enthusiastically begins outlining her ideas, and Russell immediately starts taking notes—a gesture that demonstrates respect for her input and signals his supportive stance for Ashley's guidance. When Ashley then asks to share additional thoughts, she appears more relaxed, picking up her notebook to reference specific ideas. Russell's affirmative response and continued note-taking further enhance the collaborative atmosphere, indicating their shared commitment to the process. Their gestures, body language, and active listening suggest a growing mutual respect and trust, positioning them as equal partners in co-constructing a project vision—an interpretation validated during our member-check.

Episode 3: Power has Shifted confidence is revealed

This episode takes place on Day 2 of the writing-intensive session, featuring Ashley and Russell collaborating on a research-practice brief in response to feedback from the principal investigators. The discussion centers on biases, particularly those related to AI tools. The session begins with a facilitator-researcher asking the team what biases they anticipate, referencing a prior in-depth conversation on the topic. In this interaction, Russell and Ashley continue to develop and demonstrate their power dynamic as additional facilitator-researchers join the conversation. Ashley's responses are marked by steady eye contact with the researchers, underscoring her confidence and engagement. Russell, in turn, supports her with non-verbal cues, such as nodding while attentively observing her remarks. Ashley's expertise in educational technology becomes evident as she compares AI interactions with students to Socratic teaching methods, highlighting critical limitations in AI's ability to validate sources and recognize biases. The episode concludes with Russell attentively listening to Ashley and refraining from interrupting the exchange. This subtle physical cue highlights his observational role, reflecting a professional dynamic that balances collaboration with space for individual expertise. Ashley is given the opportunity to articulate her insights, while Russell offers a supportive yet unobtrusive presence, illustrating a collaborative and respectfully bounded relationship. We view this interaction as significant, as it contrasts with a scenario where Russell might be expected to take the lead when interacting with facilitators he knows, or where Ashley might exhibit less confidence. Instead, the sustained comfort and mutual support observed here represent an ongoing interactional accomplishment.

Discussion and implications of power dynamics in a CHAT system

Throughout the episodes, tensions within the CHAT system become apparent in the interactions between Russell and Ashley, particularly regarding rules and the division of labor. We believe that the default assumption is the researcher is an expert, and that was in tension with Russell's efforts to establish a balance which we see resolved in the right triangle. The first significant tension arises as Russell attempts to shift perceptions associated with his title, which may convey an "ivory tower" status. He actively works to change Ashley's possible view of him as solely the "expert" or the primary generator of knowledge. In response, Ashley identifies a tension in Russell's approach, especially when he attempts to establish a connection based on their shared knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogies. Russell references a researcher whom both are familiar with someone Ashley studied with during her master's program and whom Russell knows. This shared knowledge subtly places Russell in a position

of authority, as he takes on the role of researcher, while Ashley acknowledges his expertise due to his academic background.

The second tension we observe occurs during the division of labor with Russell and Ashley working on co-creating the research practice brief. Ashley's limited engagement and minimal verbal responses indicate a sense of reluctance or resistance, reflecting her discomfort with the existing underlying division of labor issues. In response, Russell adopts open body language and affirming language, noting that certain terms are rarely applied in school settings. This approach invites Ashley to take ownership of how the language and concepts can be adapted to suit her specific school context, addressing her needs within the co-design of their research practice brief. We interpret it as a balanced power dynamic where the coach is perceived to have the power while the researcher supports. It can be perceived that Ashley gains agency, while Russell transitions to a more supportive role. This can be identified as sharing Power & Co-design, illustrating a collaborative approach where decisions are made together. By redefining the rules and challenging traditional hierarchical roles, Russell fosters a power-sharing dynamic that enables Ashley to participate more actively in shaping the project.

As a result of the balanced power the outcome is a new activity system that points to a collaborative, co-design approach that results in a pursued coach-initiated research practice brief (RPB). By using open body language and collaborative language, Russell helps create an environment where Ashley feels empowered. This shift not only dissipates the initial tensions but also fosters a more equitable division of labor, leading to a balanced sharing of power. As a result, Ashley gains confidence and is empowered to contribute actively to the design of the research practice brief alongside Russell. This progression shows how initial tensions related to rules and division of labor can be managed and ultimately resolved through shifts in power dynamics. Moving from a hierarchical model to a collaborative partnership, Russell and Ashley achieve a shared understanding, creating a foundation for effective, mutually beneficial collaboration.

Our analysis shows how initial tensions, rather than hindering progress, can evolve into pathways for resolution and deeper mutual understanding, highlighting the iterative and evolving nature of relationship-building in researcher-coach partnerships. Our findings highlight moment-by-moment work that goes into conveying openness, mutual trust, and thus suggests that we can think about how to encourage those behaviors, possibly explicitly with researchers in the future. Using the CHAT framework enabled us to explore how these relationships are shaped not only by professional roles and responsibilities but also by a shared willingness to engage in reflective, open dialogue. By documenting these intricate interactions, this study contributes valuable insights into the processes that support sustainable and equitable partnerships.

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