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Virtual Coaching: Throughout and Beyond a Pandemic

by Kimberly Blumke



Months before COVID-19 impacted all aspects of education, I was already researching ways to collaborate virtually with teachers. As an Early Literacy Coach at Cheboygan-Otsego-Presque Isle Educational Service District (COPESD)—and the only coach to cover 13 elementary schools and over 2,000 square miles—I was struggling to find the best way to work with teachers around the implementation of MAISA-GELN's (2016) *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy Grades K to 3*. In September 2019, our main office building burned to the ground, so I no longer had a place to hold professional learning sessions. I had moved my coaching sessions to a local district, but the long drive was a concern for some educators, and I wasn't getting the participation I had hoped for. And, of course, the availability of substitute teachers is always an issue.

When I decided to move my professional learning sessions online, the change was met with positive feedback. At the time, I offered half-day sessions for grade bands so one substitute teacher could be shared between two teachers. While teachers liked this format, it still didn't give me enough opportunity to coach teachers one-on-one. I started asking myself how I could use virtual platforms to not only provide professional learning but also achieve impactful virtual



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coaching. In this article, I share the journey I took from searching for innovative ways to partner with teachers remotely to creating and implementing a virtual coaching program within my Educational Service District.

Getting Started

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Early Literacy Coaching Model (2018) offered a road map of what I should be doing as a coach, but it didn't necessarily lay out specific steps for implementing a coaching cycle. I wanted our coaching cycle to be grounded in a constructivist approach where teachers were active, not passive learners, so they could learn by doing and reflect on their actions. I believe teachers need to have agency over their learning if it is to be meaningful to them. Researcher, speaker, and writer Andy Hargreaves argues, "Too many professional development initiatives are done to teachers—not for, with or by them" (n.d.). I challenged myself with designing a process for partnering with teachers that was meaningful and relevant through a virtual format.

I dug into articles and research on virtual coaching with a vengeance. One of the best sources I found was the Visibly Better website (2021) designed by The Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) at Harvard University; their Best Foot Forward Project (2021) included a toolkit for video observation. These resources emphasized reflection as a key part

of coaching. Additional research pointed to virtual coaching being just as effective, and possibly even more effective, than face-to-face coaching (Vernon-Feagans, Bratsch-Hines, Varghese, Bean, & Hedrick, 2015). I was intrigued! I knew virtual coaching could help me overcome the barriers of the physical distance and time restraints that I had been facing.

My research led me to several different companies that support virtual coaching. I looked at structures, requested quotes, participated in demos, and searched for customer reviews of the companies and their platforms. I compiled a summary of the research and proposed it to my supervisor during the winter of 2020. It turns out my supervisor had been thinking along the same lines and was very supportive of creating a virtual coaching program at COPESD. The two of us agreed to move forward with a company called Sibme to help us structure our program and provide an online platform for our work. It is important to note that virtual coaching can occur by using free online tools if funding isn't available for a platform.

Preparation and Program Roll Out

I spent the spring and summer planning the structure of our virtual coaching program and creating support materials. My coaching partner, Kim Peters, and I rolled our virtual coaching program out to all building principals within our ESD in the fall. While the principals were understandably preoccupied with COVID-related challenges and planning, our program was met with reserved, yet positive, interest.

We invited three districts to work with us as we began our first set of coaching cycles. We set up face-to-face meetings with the three building principals to explain the virtual coaching structure and share related documents. We explained expectations for the coaches, teachers, and principals and answered questions. All three principals were receptive to the program and were eager to move forward. While the principals talked about mandating the participation of all K-3 teachers, we emphasized that Thompson and Kosiorek (2017) argue: "Optional participation means that teachers have the choice of whether or not they will participate in the

program. The fact that the program is not mandated or forced on teachers is an important element to its success, especially in the early implementation stage" (p. 15). Based on our recommendation, all three principals followed our lead by sticking to voluntary participation.

According to Knight (2021), a coaching program can be successful or it can fail based on the level of principal support. Knight goes as far as to state that the easiest way to triple the impact of coaching is through principal support. Principals can support coaches by making sure they have the time to coach, encourage a partnership approach between coaches and teachers, understand that the coach-teacher work is confidential, and engage in regular meetings with the coach to make sure they are on the same page. Additionally, principals should do what they expect of teachers. Recording their own meetings and presentations in order to learn from them can go a long way in supporting coaching.

Next, we emailed teachers, inviting them to join us in a virtual coaching partnership. The invitation included a brief video explanation of our coaching program, as well as an option to view a more in-depth "infomercial." We asked teachers to respond with a time we could meet face-to-face to give them more information, create timelines, and deliver the iPads and mics (purchased with ESD funds designated for professional learning) that would be used for recording lessons. We invited 14 K-3 teachers, and eleven responded expressing interest. While it took some persistence, we eventually met with teachers and got them set up to begin our virtual coaching cycles.

Since then, we have only met with teachers remotely. At the time of this writing, 10 teachers have either finished the coaching program or are still working through it with the exception of one teacher who stopped after three cycles due to personal reasons. We consider completion to be after four to six cycles, with a preference of six cycles.

The Virtual Coaching Cycle

Our coaching cycle consists of four steps, with the ultimate goal of helping teachers strengthen the

implementation of the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K to 3*. These steps were created through collaboration with Sibme. According to the MDE Early Literacy Coaching Model (2018), coaching should be encouraging and not evaluative, so we try to infuse this notion in all of our work with teachers to build trust.

- **Step 1 Pre-Coaching Conversation:** This first, face-to-face meeting takes place once when we first begin our partnership. At this time, the coach and the teacher discuss which Literacy Essential will be a focus. The focus area will merge into more specific practices over the weeks, or at times, it may move to a completely different focus. Through the use of targeted, reflective questions, the coach guides the teacher in determining which areas will be most important to address to improve literacy instruction and the literacy skills of students.
- **Step 2 Teacher Recording and Reflection:** In this step, the teacher records a lesson and watches the recording to reflect on their teaching. Each teacher clips their video into a 10-12-minute segment to narrow focus on a targeted section of the lesson. The teacher creates time-stamped comments and questions as they reflect on what they see in the recording. Next, they share the clip and comments with the coach. With the Sibme platform, this is as easy as a simple drop-down menu and one click.
- **Step 3 Dialogue Cycle:** At this point, the coach responds to the teacher's comments and makes time-stamped comments or questions of their own. This exchange takes place asynchronously to allow teachers and coaches to respond back and forth when it works in their schedule.
- **Step 4 Collaborative Review:** At this point, the teacher and coach meet synchronously through Zoom or another video conferencing tool. The teacher and coach often watch the recording together, discuss the asynchronous conversation that took place, and collaborate to create new action steps and goals based on the

reflective conversation. The coach completes a Coaching Summary form that documents the highlights of the conversation, action steps, and when the next synchronous meeting will occur. Helpful resources can also be linked in the form. The action steps are added in the Sibme platform for the teacher to check off as they are completed.

Steps two through four—a cycle—are completed four to six times. We originally planned that it would take approximately one week to go through the cycle. We have found, however, that with the complications of COVID-19, the cycle takes longer. Quite often, it takes us two to three weeks to get through a cycle. As stated by Brown and L'Allier (2020), "There is no magic to the coaching cycle. The format is meant to be simple and predictable, but flexible enough to meet the needs of the teachers" (p. 55). Kim and I have agreed that it is crucial to be flexible with timelines as teachers are overwhelmed with teaching face-to-face with restrictions, learning to teach online, and managing the general toll the pandemic has had on teachers both professionally and personally.

With that being said, we have also found that we need to be persistent with our communication. Because teachers have so much going on, it would be quite easy for them to push the coaching process, planning, reflection, and meetings aside. We continue to follow up with teachers to keep them engaged in the process. One teacher recently shared that participating in the virtual coaching program holds her accountable for the action steps. It makes sure she sets time aside to reflect and discuss her literacy instruction. Hall and Simeral (2015) state that reflective practitioners "have awareness of their instructional realities, are intentional in their actions, accurately assess their impact, adjust their actions on the fly, and engage in ongoing reflection" (pp. 39-41). Partnering with teachers to facilitate reflection is pivotal to our work as coaches.

Feedback

Kim and I feel that our virtual coaching program is going well, but what matters much more is if the teachers are finding value in it. We created midpoint and

endpoint teacher surveys to solicit feedback that we can use to improve our coaching structure and process. So far, the survey responses show teachers find the virtual coaching experience helpful. We asked a series of three questions using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” One hundred percent of responses scored all three of the following questions as a 4 or 5.

- Working with a virtual coach is impacting the work I do in my classroom.
- Receiving feedback on my self-recorded videos is improving the work I do in my classroom.
- Watching and reflecting on the videos I have recorded is helping me improve the work I do in my classroom.

Additional open-ended responses to the survey suggest that the teachers appreciate the flexibility of the program. They like the asynchronous structure to work through the cycle when it best fits their schedule, and they appreciate the flexibility Kim and I have for them for meeting timelines. Interestingly, teachers feel being a part of the virtual coaching program holds them accountable for keeping best practices in mind while planning and carrying out research-based lessons, even during a pandemic and the unpredictability occurring throughout the school year.

First-grade Inland Lakes Elementary teacher, Nicole Moore explained her experience:

This process has been unique, and new, and kind of inventive. It made me really excited to be a part of it. Through the process, I think the biggest takeaways were with the goal setting and the reflection we did together. I actually told Kim once that I didn't want to watch the video on the same day I recorded because I'll remember what happened instead of watching it with fresh eyes. Watching yourself teach outside of the moment is really powerful. You improve your skills because of this process. It is time-consuming, but taking the time to reflect on our teaching is something we should be doing anyway. The coaching cycle improved my teaching and my ability to pinpoint

a skill, reflect, and make adjustments that will also transfer to other parts of my teaching. It's good practice.

That said, it seems that the collaborative partnership between coach and teacher is also an important part of the process. For example, teachers seem unlikely to continue the practice of recording themselves teaching and reflecting on their lessons if we are not working with them. On the survey, teachers indicated that while they found it to be valuable, teachers probably would not continue using video unless they had someone to collaborate with around the recordings. This response suggests that it may also be possible to create a protocol for grade level or cross-district collaboration within an online platform for continuing the process of lesson recording and reflection.

We also have two surveys that we ask principals to complete to give their perceptions of the program. We have not received much feedback yet, but what we have received has been positive. One principal stated, “The work Kim is doing with my teachers is helping the teachers to recognize things that they might not have seen before. This is helping them to become better educators for our students and better teammates for the staff.” I have noticed that working virtually can make it more difficult to connect with principals. While working with teachers is our main focus, collaborating with administrators is a piece of our program we will need to improve by creating more intentional opportunities to touch base throughout the school year. Communicating with principals is important for keeping support for coaching in place.

Coaching the Coaches

My virtual coaching partner, Kim, had the great idea of doing our own reflection to help us grow as coaches. With permission, we share our teacher coaching conversations that include our own time-stamped comments and questions. Then, we collaborate around the recordings, focusing on everything from our coaching verbiage to body language. We are essentially doing what we are asking the teachers to do. At first, it was a bit uncomfortable being so vulnerable, but we got over

it once we saw the value of opening ourselves up to specific feedback to improve our coaching.

In partnership with Sibme, we recently created a Michigan ISD Literacy Coaching “Huddle” in the Sibme platform. We hope to use this as a space to share and learn with other virtual coaches across the state. To date, we have participation from three different Michigan ISDs, and we expect that number to grow. Even coaches benefit from being coached. Coaches can benefit from participating in professional learning networks. Coaches are great supporters of one another and can offer inspiration, resources, and collaboration around similar challenges (Bakhshaei, Hardy & Ostrand, 2021).

Moving Forward and Reflecting on Our Work

As we proceed, we plan to offer asynchronous collaboration opportunities among the teachers we coach. There is great value in this sort of collaboration. Teacher collaboration can not be overlooked if we want to improve student learning (EdVestors Making Space The Value of Teacher Collaboration, 2014). These collaborative opportunities will take place within our coaching platform.

We are still new to the virtual coaching world, but I am excited to be engaging with teachers more consistently at a much deeper level than I ever have. The asynchronous nature of the work allows time for me to do my own reflection, research, and plan for questioning to facilitate thinking prior to meeting with a teacher. Since I am working from home, it is easy for me to meet with teachers when it is most convenient for them, whether it is at 7:00 in the morning, on their prep period, after school, or in the evening hours. This kind of flexibility does not occur when dealing with time and space restraints. I feel that offering teachers control over when to meet greatly reduces the stress teachers feel. When teachers are more relaxed, it is much easier for them to utilize personal reflection in response to carefully crafted questions that prime the pump for refining instructional moves that are backed by the Literacy Essentials.

A Benefit for All

I truly believe that the use of video, reflective conversations, and virtual meetings is a game-changer for our coaching at COPESD. Athletes and coaches have used video and feedback to improve for years. Good teachers, just like athletes, know that there is always room for improvement. That’s the beauty of our virtual literacy coaching program. It is for all K-3 teachers, because we know all of us can always get better. Quite often, the reality of what we view in a recording is different than what we thought was happening at the moment. We hear this time and time again from teachers. At COPESD, we will continue to break down the barriers of time and space with virtual coaching to partner with teachers to improve the literacy skills of our K-3 students.

For more detailed information and documents, you can view COPESD’s Breaking Down the Barriers of Time & Space slides here: <http://bit.ly/37ABv6H>

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