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## Virtual Literacy Coaching: A Response to Time, Space, and Resources

Kimberly Peters

*Cheboygan-Otsego-Presque Isle Educational Service District, [petersk@copesd.org](mailto:petersk@copesd.org)*

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# Virtual Literacy Coaching: A Response to Time, Space, and Resources

by Kim Peters

In March of 2020, literacy educators' sense of normalcy was shaken when local schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also in March of 2020, just weeks before the announcement, I accepted a position as a literacy coach through a rural educational service district (ESD). As schools began responding to the pandemic, I began the process of shifting my identity from a teacher to a literacy coach. Questions of instructional uncertainty plagued my conversations with teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members as I entered unfamiliar territory. I wondered, could my position exist virtually? Would literacy coaching be as effective in a virtual format? How could I build relationships with teachers in a virtual setting? Embracing the uncertainty, I decided to grab hold of the challenges and step forward with grace and flexibility. This article will explore my journey into a world of virtual literacy coaching, through both necessity and intrigue.

## Virtual Literacy Coaching

It is no secret that professional learning for teachers is a billion-dollar annual industry (Kraft et al., 2018, p. 2). With this level of investment, professional learning models are under extensive pressure to produce results. Research supports a job-embedded approach to active learning, while also developing teacher's knowledge over a sustained period of time (Kraft et al., 2018). Literacy coaching is a well-known model for improving teacher instruction (Byinton & Kim, 2020; Vikaraman et al., 2017; Wetzel et al., 2020) as it supports both job-embedded practice and extensive learning overtime.

Virtual literacy coaching has become increasingly popular as districts have responded to educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ippolito et al., 2021). Emerging research suggests that virtual coaching is just as effective as in-person coaching (Kraft et al., 2018), however the transition to a virtual platform requires careful planning. Constant redesign



**Kim Peters**

of professional learning is necessary to consistently increase teacher performance while also building collaborative relationships focused on reflective practices (Bates, 2015). Virtual literacy coaching fits this model while promoting teacher agency and reflexivity. Agency and reflection are primary components of the adult learning process (Cox, 2015), and coaches can support both through the use of video and a virtual platform.

Virtual literacy coaching relies on the use of video. Athletes use video all the time. They record and carefully watch their physical performance. They select areas to improve based on video footage. Watching the video, beside a coach, athletes are able to see the difference between perception and reality, while also highlighting areas of focus. Why should teachers be any less engaged in their instructional performance? These same strategies have potential to build a teacher's awareness of the quality of their literacy instructional performance.

## Our ESD's Journey to Virtual Literacy Coaching

Before COVID-19 closures, our rural ESD employed a single literacy coach. They were already in the process of exploring ways to maximize the coach's time with teachers, while also accounting for over the 2,000 square miles of rural distance to travel between schools. In an effort to balance the demands of time, space, and resources, the ESD began researching the use of video

collaboration platforms and asynchronous communication options. Due to both luck and strategy, this ESD was ahead of the pandemic curve. Even before the fall of 2020, the ESD initiated a plan to introduce virtual literacy coaching to improve literacy instruction for the many school districts they served.

### **Building Support**

Our ESD's next steps to implementing virtual literacy coaching included promoting the program, sharing the research behind it, and gaining interest. My coaching partner and I met with building principals to understand school-wide initiatives and ensure our literacy coaching would support specific building goals. To increase buy-in, we aimed to create excitement around this new process of job-embedded professional learning. We marketed it as a teacher-led and supportive process during a time when teachers needed grace and flexibility. In an effort to promote teacher agency, participation was encouraged but completely voluntary. Within this coaching structure, we asked teachers to choose goals that were meaningful to them, which promoted a sense of ownership and purposefulness. During one pre-coaching conversation a teacher explained why she chose to participate: "I just haven't gotten any feedback. So, I'm nervous that I'm getting comfortable in the wrong sort of habits. To me, everything seems to be going well, but I would like an outsider's perspective on whether it really is going as well as it could be." This teacher knew that, as teachers, we can get comfortable in our ways and miss opportunities for growth. How do you know if you are doing it correctly without feedback?

### **Embracing Video**

When it was time to begin videorecording, there was a hint of hesitation. Videorecording is a process where reality and perception meet. Reality might differ from what is perceived, and that can be uncomfortable. In a pre-coaching conversation, one teacher expressed a concern that their video may be used during an evaluation or as evidence of poor teaching practices. For this reason, we emphasized confidentiality and the importance of a non-evaluative coaching relationship. My coaching partner and I did not bring judgment into our conversations; we met teachers with praise, encour-

agement, questions, and suggestions. Additionally, we operated under the premise that adult learners need to be in control of their learning (Cox, 2015). We held the belief that professional learning needs to be valuable and relevant to the individual being coached. During this process the teacher was in the driver's seat and we were in the passenger seat. Some teachers recorded multiple lessons before deciding to share a portion of their first one. Once they submitted their first video, it was our responsibility to engage them in authentic professional learning and encourage more participation.

Ultimately, teachers found the use of video helpful. In a feedback survey, one teacher noted that they gained, "a deeper reflection of my teaching and practices." Another teacher noted, "Watching myself on camera and changing the way I do things was a huge help." Video allowed us to support teachers, even when we could not meet in person. In fact, using video led to some additional advantages. While coaches typically observe face to face, that additional bodily presence can be distracting or increase a teacher's level of discomfort.

### **Choosing a Platform**

When exploring digital technologies for coaching, there are a wide array of tools that can support teacher and coach collaboration (Leighton et al., 2018). Our ESD partnered with a digital platform called Sibme, which allows teachers to upload their videos, so literacy coaches can leave timestamped feedback and collaborate with teachers on the discussion board. We were able to carry on asynchronous conversations and pinpoint specific moments in classroom instruction that could be enhanced. The timestamped feedback feature proved to be one of the most valuable methods of our virtual coaching model. The timestamp feature allows you to pause in the exact moment and highlight successes or add in additional resources directly to the lesson. When viewing the video for the first time, I chose to withhold my initial noticings from the comments section. Allowing the teachers to comment first and ask questions around their lesson, provided me with a lens for viewing their video. By using this approach, I could better meet their professional goals and respect the knowledge that they bring to the lesson.

### **Leveraging Asynchronous Reflection**

Teachers and coaches are busy. It is common knowledge that a teacher's schedule is filled with both spontaneous and planned learning. Finding time to schedule an observation and a follow up coaching session can be extremely difficult (Leighton et al., 2018). This asynchronous format also allowed us to connect with teachers on their own schedule. We were no longer bound by synchronous appointments before school or during lunch time.

Additionally, asynchronous reflection eliminated the need to reschedule due to the loss of a planning period or a student emergency. Asynchronous communication also provided flexibility, which compliments the ways in which the pandemic has heightened teachers' busy schedules.

Initially, teaching from our homes presented its own challenges: classroom interactions, families to care for, pets to keep track of, and full-time jobs to maintain. As our schools and communities reopened their classrooms, this asynchronous format provided a new level of collaboration. Our reflective conversations took place during sporting events, during evening hours, or while we were relaxing in front of the TV. The flexible nature of asynchronous communication increased opportunities to collaborate and grow.

The benefits of asynchronous communication for a literacy coach extend beyond a time management perspective. As a coach, the use of video allowed me to pause, re-watch, and thoughtfully link additional resources for learning. The classroom is a fast-paced environment, where opportunities for learning in the moment can pass right by. If we are bound to a face-to-face coaching session, there is potential to miss excellent opportunities for sharing important resources. In this model, we can pause and do some research. We can respond thoughtfully and prepare resources that match the teacher's line of questioning. Thinking extensively about each moment in the lesson, from multiple perspectives, allows coaches to highlight several goal areas within a single lesson observation.

### **Collaborating via Synchronous Sessions**

Coaching cycles generally follow some type of pattern which encourages both planning and reflecting conversations. In our ESD, we begin collaboration with a pre-observation discussion, followed by a recorded lesson, asynchronous discussion, and a final synchronous meeting via a virtual platform to reflect on previous learning and plan for the next cycle (Walpole and McKenna, 2010). Cycles typically take place within one to two weeks and teachers will voluntarily participate in four to six cycles of coaching. As stated previously, it can be challenging to find the time to schedule an in-person observation and a follow-up coaching session. A synchronous virtual platform provides flexible scheduling and still allows for sharing resources and a deep discussion around learning (Leighton et al., 2018).

Throughout this coaching model, reflection is at the heart of all interactions. While video and asynchronous collaboration can account for a portion of a coaching cycle, it is important to follow up learning with a synchronous coaching conversation to process and develop teacher reflexivity. Synchronous conversations allow for an opportunity to highlight teacher goals and support new learning through a reflective conversation model, such as those provided by Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2019). Taking into account the pandemic and travel time, the ESD opted to maintain a synchronous virtual platform for coaching conversations. We met with teachers synchronously via Zoom to review video reflections and build in additional reflective thinking.

We found that by allowing teacher agency in the lessons they chose to share and giving them space to record, we were creating a learning environment which supported agency, collaboration, and reflexivity. As part of the reflection process, a teacher stated, "Reflecting on my teaching has made me take the time to stop and think about what I feel good about and also things to improve upon. I found that I was doing things that I didn't even know I was doing! This experience has been very positive from beginning to end!"

### **Turning the Tables**

I could see this amazing practice changing the way

teachers thought about professional development, but I was only a part of it from an outsider's perspective. How could I advocate for a professional learning method that I did not take part in myself? Feeling vulnerable, I asked my mentor to go through a recorded coaching conversation and provide me with feedback. Being new in my position, I understood the impacts of effective and ineffective literacy coaching. Effective coaching can significantly improve a teacher's instructional results (Leighton et al., 2018). I wanted to make sure that my coaching conversations were efficient, encouraging, reflective, nonjudgmental, and resourceful. With a teacher's permission, I shared a recorded coaching session to the virtual platform, just as the teachers had. After submitting my video, just as some teachers had expressed, I nervously awaited feedback. It wasn't until my coaching partner connected with me in a positive way around the video that I was able to begin thoughtfully reflecting. My coaching partner and I reviewed the session, minute by minute, and used the time-stamped feedback feature to have an asynchronous conversation around my noticings. My coaching partner replied with positive, constructive feedback. She attached resources to my video, which helped me better understand the coaching process, including conversation maps that I could use in the future. I could visualize myself growing into my new position. This process felt right and validated the work we were doing. My coaching partner and I have continued this type of collaboration when we have struggled or when we sought opportunities to grow. Most importantly, now we bring to each coaching session a culture of reflection and accountability and a desire to improve.

### **Making Digital Connections**

Many educators are comfortable using social media applications for communication and video sharing, so taking advantage of this digital mode for teacher learning was a natural progression. When I first began this journey, my biggest concern was building relationships with teachers in a virtual setting. Coaching is a relational process that requires trust and rapport (Kraft et al., 2018). Therefore, we wanted to create a digital space where trust and collaboration could take place.

Providing a virtual space for collaboration was well accepted within the schools that we began working with. While the ESD provided both an iPad and mic for participating teachers, some teachers opted to use their phones or desktops for the majority of their communication. Teachers were already using social platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to build peer networks for collaboration (Leighton et al., 2018). To build upon this networking momentum, we harnessed the power of collaboration through Sibme's digital platform and mobile app. We spiced up our profiles with pictures, shared getting to know each other videos, and commented in large groups. We built a network, across districts, with a common literacy initiative. This has become a new professional network to support educators in their literacy journey.

### **Prioritizing Equity**

How can we have a conversation around literacy education in today's culture without discussing equitable learning opportunities? The issue of equity should be at the heart of every educational decision and policy, which is why I critique the ideology of traditional literacy professional learning, juxtaposing it with the virtual literacy coaching model. Looking at the ideology of current professional learning models, there are many tenets that call for a critical examination: access and funding for professional learning, the use of asynchronous models, and traditional modes for learning which are not inclusive of technology.

Literacy coaching has supported teacher learning and growth for years, however many districts struggle to allocate funds to support a full-time literacy coach. One cost analysis estimated that literacy coaching costs \$3,300 to \$5,200 per teacher (Knight cited in Kraft et al., 2018, p. 548). As a result, smaller or less funded districts often have to be more innovative to achieve instructional gains. Virtual literacy coaching can serve multiple teachers from various districts, accounting for time, space, and limited resources (Leighton et al., 2018). Smaller schools, which rely on their teachers to fill in during low staff situations, are typically less likely to participate in coaching due to time constraints. These time constraints have only increased during the

pandemic, where districts are facing substitute teacher shortages (Lambert, 2021). Asynchronous virtual literacy coaching opens the door for teachers to work around their own schedules in understaffed districts. Traditional models for professional learning rarely account for different modes of learning.

### Final Thoughts

Literacy coaching is a highly effective professional learning model. While districts are strapped to find ways to increase their coaching capacity, the pandemic has encouraged us to leverage digital tools to meet school districts' demands of time, space, and resources. We have learned a great deal about virtual literacy coaching over the past few years, but there is still a great deal more to learn. Educational stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers can explore the efficacy of virtual literacy coaching as a high-quality and cost-effective model for improving literacy instruction.

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### Author Biography

**Kim Peters** is an early literacy coach at Cheboygan-Otsego-Presque Isle Educational Service District. Peters is also a doctoral student at Indiana University in the Literacy, Language, and Culture Education department. Her work and research interests focus on early literacy development, particularly among marginalized populations. Peters' specific area of expertise includes kindergarten through third grade reading and writing development, working with teachers around literacy instruction, and issues of equity in literacy education. Her most recent publication (2022) is titled *Challenging the Poverty Narrative Through Children's Literature* and was presented at the Michigan Reading Association's annual conference in March of 2022. She can be reached at <petersk@copesp.org>.

