

Connected Coaching in Connected Spaces

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When teachers examine, question, reflect on their ideas and develop new practices that lead toward their ideals, students are alive. When teachers stop growing, so do their students (Barth, 1980, p. 145)

Something was missing. We could feel it. The conversations fell flat. Teachers were sharing concrete kinds of things like webpages or experiences in using new Web 2.0 tools, but no one was replying with depth, extending ideas, or asking questions.

Grounded in empirical research, we were working hard at building a culture of inquiry and trust, yet the educators in our online communities of practice continued to work in silos of isolation.

The teams participating in our Powerful Learning Practice professional development had been congenial enough at our face-to-face kickoff meeting, but as the year wore on the discussions we had hoped would grow into deep teacher learning and the collaborative construction of knowledge seemed to only produce a “stuckness.” The interactions of our team members lacked the collegiality we knew would be needed for relationships to grow and collective inquiry to emerge. Our years of experience had shown us that without trust and the willingness to ask hard questions and have messy

conversations in virtual spaces, these teachers would never realize their own considerable potential and begin see themselves as the learners and leaders needed in today's shifting learning landscape.

Our goal was to help communities of educators, working together in job-embedded teams, deepen their understanding of the emerging literacies that are influencing teaching and learning in the 21st century. We felt that if we could help them to become more cognizant of their strengths, find their online voices, and use those voices to have continuous, concrete and specific conversations with each other about their teaching practices, they could begin to lead true systemic reform in their schools. We wanted to provide ways for educators in online communities of inquiry to take what they learned from each other and use it to develop face-to-face "critical friendships" back in their schools. In teams, they would observe each other teach and then give warm and cool feedback about what they had observed. We saw them co-creating together, planning, designing, researching and evaluating their curriculum work while teaching each other what they learned. With this relationship established, we felt we could better facilitate and mediate the thinking of the members of our online communities and assist them in becoming more self directed.

As we searched to fill the void we were sensing, we came to the conclusion that an appreciative coaching model would best provide the means for community members to realize their own potential to change themselves and to improve learning for their

students. After a great deal of deep inquiry among ourselves and the Powerful Learning Practice staff, our Connected Coaches model emerged.

Connected Coaches in Connected Spaces

Using a strength-based, appreciative inquiry approach, our Connected Coaches lead members of our online communities through a process that results in a shared vision of new ways of learning together in online spaces. The coaches work to increase the confidence and self-efficacy of individual team members. They also work to create learning experiences that demonstrate ways that teamwork is necessary to grow as connected learners. A Connected Coach guides participants toward collegial interaction by helping build a bridge from the theory they are hearing to practical application. Our experience has shown us that just creating an understanding of how we learn in networks and communities is not enough to generate a deep commitment to sharing and collective knowledge building -- the kind of growth that results in innovative school improvement. Connected Coaches, through various activities and discussions help participants create connections to the content and context, to themselves, and to those who are part of the learning community at school and online.

The Model-- Wayfinding as a Connected Coach

“Coaching is as much about the heart as about the head.” (Jim Knight)

Our Connected Coaching model draws strongly from *Evocative Coaching* (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010), *Cognitive Coaching* (Costa & Garmston, 1994), *Appreciative Inquiry* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and *The Connected Educator*

(Nussbaum-Beach & Ritter-Hall, 2011). We ask our coaches to engage in what we call *wayfinding*, a term we feel is appropriate to the learning that occurs in connected spaces, and we set out pathmarkers to guide them in their role as coaches. Since we believe this coaching journey is as much an art as it may be a science, we intentionally unnumber the pathmarkers and suggest the process is not prescriptive. We indicate to our coaches that there may be detours; there may be a need to loop back and revisit as they engage in listening, paraphrasing, and asking good questions. We remind them as they wind their way through trust building, questioning, and facilitating design thinking to always be mindful of celebrating progress.

We intend that these markers (described in the table below) illuminate the way as coaches facilitate the journey of others toward a more accomplished reflective practice that is as much self-directed as it is collaborative — always with the goal of creating momentum for purposeful inquiry around a shared vision of self and school improvement.

<p>Trust Building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing rapport Examining climate and culture Setting ground rules Establishing norms Exploring hopes and fears 	<p><i>“Trust opens our work and dreams to each other and makes possible continuous improvement of how we teach and what our students learn.” --</i></p> <p>Carl Glickman</p>
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<p>Questioning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking stories Doing active listening Paraphrasing/mindfulness Making observations Mediating Thinking Affirming potential Asking appreciative questions Discovering strengths Clarifying focus Making requests 	<p><i>“Great questions elicit what is on the teacher’s mind rather than what is on the coach’s mind.” --Tschannen-Moran</i></p> <p><i>“By playing with the wording of a wondering, teachers often fine-tune and discover more detail about the subject they are really passionate about understanding.” --Dana & Yendol-Hoppey</i></p>
<p>Facilitating design thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framing aspirations Brainstorming ideas Inviting possibilities Designing experiments Valuing cross-disciplinary teamwork 	<p><i>“The positive lens refers to ... our capacity to construct better organizations and technologies through positive discourse. Joining a positive lens onto organizing with the transformative power of design thinking opens new horizons and uncovers previously overlooked possibilities....” -- Michel Avital and Richard Boland</i></p>

Chart adapted and remixed from Tschannen-Moran, *Evocative Coaching*, 2010 and IAC Coaching Masteries, 2009

Dispositions of Connected Coaches

Shared beliefs become the foundation for the shared values held by any group who operates together, be it family, church, school, government or baseball team. The vision for any group – how it operates and the purpose for which it exists – is grounded in the values it holds. Our group of Connected Coaches is no different.

Connected Coaches grow in skills and understanding from their collaborative experiences. Over time they develop dispositions and values that influence, inform and provide a foundation for their work. Through this lens, we suspect the coaching role will take coaches themselves on a learning journey that may shift some of their own dispositions and values to align more closely with those of a connected learner.

Because they are not coaching face to face, Connected Coaches develop a more specialized set of values that help them negotiate the coaching of others in an online environment. Additionally, because norms and values are generally created by the members of a specific group, it helps to have a system of beliefs that are flexible and malleable to differing perspectives. We have created a list of dispositions that we believe provide a meaningful belief system and foundation of values that will support our Connected Coaches in the work they do with a very diverse group of learners. We encourage in our coaches

- A propensity for and understanding of strengths based, appreciative approaches;

- A tendency toward mindfulness (paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally);
- A commitment to understanding gained through listening and asking good questions related to practice;
- Perseverance toward deep thought by exploring ideas and concepts, rethinking, revising, and continual repacking and unpacking, resisting urges to finish prematurely;
- Courage and initiative to engage in discussions on difficult or messy topics;
- Willingness to leave one's comfort zone to experiment with new strategies;
- Commitment to deep reflection and growth over time;
- An attitude of open-mindedness, integrity, and professional behavior;
- Dedication to the ongoing development of expertise;
- Ardor for a culture of collegiality – that "None of us is as good as all of us" and that the contributions of all can lead to improved coaching practice.

Leveraging Online Spaces in Connected Coaching

Our Connected Coaching model is very different from coaching in physical, face-to-face environments. With the rise of learning in online communities, the increase in virtual exchanges, and the development of global personal learning networks, we feel it is an idea whose time has come. In our mind, Connected Coaching will be less of a replacement for traditional coaching models and more of an addition to good adult pedagogy online. We also see Connected Coaching as deepening the opportunities for face to face coaching, becoming a blended model that spills over from the online space

into the learners' local context. However, we do believe that there are shifts to consider when coaching in an online space – distinct differences from traditional approaches.

Moving Beyond Text

Development of an online voice/personality is crucial to the success of the Connected Coach. While text remains the default communication of the Web, it creates its own unique drawbacks. Trust is developed when individuals have a deeper understanding of each other through repeated interactions over time. In terms of trust building, coaches who use text only communication can be easily misunderstood. For example, there are many ways to interpret the typed word “hello” depending on the voice intonation, body language and expression. In spaces devoid of body language and other visual clues, the timely and effective use of video and audio can be a way to build trust and transparency in the coaching process. Images and infographics can also go a long way to illustrate and share ideas. The more senses involved in the communication, the better the understanding. Our Connected Coaches become creative online communicators who leverage the technologies available to make the experience more than just text on a virtual page. As they build trust, they may ask those they coach to share ideas on a wall of Wallwisher (<http://www.wallwisher.com>), or create a 6-word story (an image with 6 words that tell a story) using Picnik (<http://www.picnik.com/>), or to converse through an audioboo (<http://audioboo.fm>), a podcast service.

Attending to Time and Developmental Focuses

Offline interactions generally happen in real time, especially coaching relationships, without much asynchronous communications. That's not the case online. Everyone has slightly different expectations in terms of response time, especially across cultures and geographical areas. We believe it is critical that our coaches respond consistently. Live online experiences bring a different set of issues. For example, wait time is a mainstay of good teaching; demonstrating wait time in a virtual environment is difficult, but can be an effective tool in helping individuals think more deeply and become more self directed. Our coaches are mindful of an appropriate response time.

As our online communities emerge and evolve, there is typically a four-fold focus: sharing information, co-constructing knowledge, improving over time, and innovating. These foci are in developmental order. In an effort to help participants get better or improve, over time our coaches share less information and opinion and operate more as helpers in the co-construction of knowledge. Often their efforts are spent helping teams and individuals recognize and appreciate diversity within the group and develop relationships that leverage diverse and critical feedback for positive growth. They understand that as they help members realize their own potential over time, innovation follows.

“Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that their students can learn to weave a world for themselves.” (Parker Palmer)

Connected Coaching: An Inquiry Approach to Developing Expertise

Our Connected Coaches engage in and are committed to an ongoing process to develop greater expertise in coaching. Since we are all separated by geographical distance, we share ideas, model and demonstrate good coaching practice, and reflect deeply in virtual discussions in private areas within the online communities of those we coach. We began our training of Connected Coaches by introducing coaching in broad, big picture strokes. We modeled and demonstrated building trust and rapport through the use of various Web 2.0 tools to share ideas and thoughts. Opportunities to practice coaching skills followed, with feedback highlighting the strengths of their performances. The introduction of resources and questions in threaded discussions enabled the coaches to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the individual elements we all identified as essential to coaching. Layering and spiraling coaching elements and concepts led increasingly to deeper understandings of our coaching model and processes.

In addition, we meet bi-monthly in a webinar format to celebrate successes and learnings, to practice ways of leveraging online spaces in developing and maintaining trust, and to engage in conversation around sometimes difficult topics as we seek to continuously perfect the best model for coaching online. The conversations in both the synchronous meetings and asynchronous online spaces have been incredibly rich and deepened everyone's understanding of the process. Our coaches have indicated an affinity for the approach to peer learning we have adopted and are refining together. As our coach colleague Brenda Sherry commented: *"I can't believe I've been teaching for*

24 years, a job that is so much about communicating, and this time with you is the first time I've had a chance to learn deeply about communication.”

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