Coaching Journal: An Exploration of Partnership Principles

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**The First Meeting**

Coaching another person can be a challenging proposition, especially when the topics for coaching involve ideas that are new and quite often threatening. I have had the pleasure of coaching a young, energetic teacher, who is amazing to observe in the classroom. His name is Clint Podell, and he teaches sixth grade Social Studies. When I decided to ask Clint to work with me, I had been in his room several times as the school’s academic coach, observing his lessons on the literacy initiative I am overseeing. I was immediately enthralled with his rapport with students, his creative lesson plans, his enthusiastic style of teaching, and his classroom management. He struck me as a very confident, open-minded teacher who would be receptive to new ideas. But what I did NOT observe in my visits with Clint was any use of technology. As we built a coach/teacher relationship since the first of the year, I began to think that Clint would benefit from some technology coaching from me. So I set up a meeting to discuss the possibility.

In our text, *Instructional Coaching*, Knight (2007) discusses the importance of the Partnership Principle. I felt Clint was a good candidate to coach in technology for several reasons: 1) Learning to create authentic learning by the integration of meaningful technology in the classroom is something that would be useful to him, 2) I view Clint as an equal and we have a mutual respect for one another, 3) he has always been very easy to talk with and receptive to incorporating new ideas, and 4) Clint is an influential teacher at Griffin with other teachers. Garnering his support will help me in my coaching effort with others.

When I approached Clint for our first meeting, it was more from the perspective of an academic coach to a teacher. I did not have a preconceived plan to discuss technology coaching with him at this time, but it did end up coming up in the conversation. I asked Clint about his content and the plans he had for the rest of this semester. He shared with me that he would be teaching students about WWII, the Holocaust, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the beginning of the Cold War…all topics in which I am fascinated. In keeping with Knight’s (2007) suggestion about coaches being good listeners, this first session was more about learning the content that was going to be covered and the plans Clint had to deliver and assess this content.

We connected on several levels in sharing stories about teaching this content before, and the time became suitable to ask him for his help in my technology coaching endeavors. I asked if he would like to work together and allow me to co-teach with him for a week or so, and he was very receptive and open to the idea. He was also very inquisitive, as well. I shared my awareness with him about using technology to create authentic learning for the students, and I explained my enthusiasm for how transformational technology can be in the classroom. He became more and more excited about the idea as we talked. In this interaction, Clint and I firmly established the sense of mutual respect and equality that Knight (2007) discusses in his book. Once I had a firm idea of what kind of a time frame we were working with and what kind of content we would need to master, I told Clint I would do some research and get back with him.

This first meeting went very well, because I was sure to exercise another important aspect of the Partnership Principle: Voice. By allowing Clint to freely express his ideas and opinions, we opened the door to a new possibility: true collaboration in a trusting partnership. At the close of our meeting, we set a time to reconvene. My objective, now that I understood the needs of the teacher, was to determine what kinds of technology options we could utilize and how we could infuse a technology plan into his scope and sequence.

**The Second Meeting**

Inspired by our first conversation, I did a little research into what I thought were some really great technology pieces that he could add to his plan. I wanted to come up with a variety of ideas to give Clint choice as to what he wanted to accomplish in the short time we have together. According to Knight (2007), choice in a partnership is important and evokes a cooperative spirit between coach and teacher. Because he was doing several different mini-lessons on these various aspects of WWII and beyond, I thought having students build up to creating a group wiki would be a good idea. I also thought about utilizing Edmodo for some aspect of his class discussion, and I wanted to show him the “ins and outs” of Voicethread as a place where students could post messages to the outside world and ask for feedback. Additionally, I wanted to hook him up to e-Pals in an effort to connect with a class in Europe to exchange ideas and as a potential “real world audience” for the final projects. Having planned this much, I was ready for my next meeting. The challenge of this meeting was to get more clarity about timeframes and lesson execution, and as Knight (2007) suggests, to open up a dialogue by asking pertinent questions in an effort to fully understand what Clint has to accomplish. This way we could figure out a way to integrate the technology component together.

When I met with Clint, I asked him to tell me about the rest of his unit in terms of time, teaching, and assessments. It was also important to fully understand the degree to which he was going to tackle each topic. As Clint was talking about his scope and sequence, I was figuring out ways to infuse the technology I had planned into his existing plan. When it came time to approach what I had to offer, I was sure to lay out all the ideas of integrating technology “cafeteria style,” explaining how each tool could be utilized based on Clint’s plan. In keeping with Knight’s (2007) Partnership Principles, I felt it was important to give Clint a sense of choice, instead of thrusting too much technology on him all at once.

As we continued the dialogue (another of Knight’s Partnership Principles) we exchanged a series of ideas which would accomplish what both of us needed to have done. Clint decided that he really liked the idea of group wikis and Edmodo. He did not want to bite off more than he could chew, so we kept it limited to these two ideas. We also determined that with more time to plan, we could create quite an interesting unit for the future, using more technology ideas. This was very encouraging!

At this point in our conversation, Clint became very serious and intense. I could tell he was really thinking things through from beginning to end. He asked a lot of questions as did I. And we shared a lot of interesting ideas. The greatest challenges of this conversation had to do with 1) understanding how the technology integration would take place, 2) finding the time to allow students to engage with the technology, and 3) ensuring that we had the computers secured and the materials we needed in order to accomplish our goal successfully. We determined that with the limited time we had, Clint would build up background information about each area of study over the next week and a half. This would give students enough information to know what to research once we got them on computers. We also determined that Clint would divide the students into groups of four and that they would work together collaboratively to research one topic.

We decided we would create a matrix of choices about ways students could share their learning on their wikis, and then tie in their individual wikis under a common theme. Clint liked the idea of using wikis, because he felt the platform was very flexible while also being fun for kids. We also determined that the students would do a better job, because their contributions would be more “public” for all to see. This added to the authenticity of the learning. We decided to split responsibilities prior to our next meeting. Clint would email me the various group topics for research, and I would create the “authentic scenario” for students along with a handout explaining the project. We would be ready to plunge into the project, which will be taking place after Thanksgiving Holidays. After the Holiday, we will start right away with two days of research followed by the creation of the wikis. Our next meeting will consist of putting all the pieces together as a final check before the roll out of the lesson to students.

**The Third Meeting**

The third meeting was with Clint and his “push in” ESOL teacher, David Kitzler. David wanted to be included in this meeting to determine what kinds of things he could do to help make this lesson most accessible to his students. I was glad he was able to join us, because he offered some excellent perspectives that I would not have thought of on my own. As Knight (2007) posits, “in a partnership, everyone benefits from the success, learning, or experience of others…and all members are rewarded by what one individual contributes.” So, I was able to learn along with the collaborating teachers, and realize that we all share professional expertise from a variety of perspectives. When we listen to each other and reciprocate, we are all better for it. In this meeting, I showed Clint and David the handouts (attached) that I created for the children and we discussed the Matrix of technology options from which students will choose. The matrix includes Prezis, Weebly Websites, Glogster posters, Voicethread, and Toondoos, along with a “wild card” choice for kids. The groupings are differentiated by product, as some groups have a more challenging project than others. We decided that Monday would be devoted to rolling out the project and getting students started on research. We also decided to find good websites from which students can research as a way to save time and simplify the process for students. Since there are 12 groupings, we divided up the groups and all agreed to find 5 websites per group from which to research. We decided that on Wednesday, we would roll out the technology after students did the research and the rest of the week would be dedicated to working on the final product. The greatest challenge of this project is time. We have only limited time. So we will have to work smart.

**Show Time: Classroom Experience**

“The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” --Robert Burns

After the Thanksgiving Holiday, Clint and I hit the ground running with his classes. I was able to spend the entire three days with his various classes, and I have learned from personal experience what Robert Burns learned back in the late 1700s. No matter how well one plans, something will always go “awry”!

**First Challenge:** We figured out that in order to do group wikis and most Web 2.0 applications, every student needed an email address. We discovered that there are a great deal of sixth graders who do NOT have email addresses. We also discovered that to sign up for an email account, one must be 15. These were very real pitfalls, and took additional time to overcome. The only option at our disposal was to “fudge” the birthdates of our students to accommodate the need to gain access to the rest of our plan. In the future, I think we will need to get parental permission in advance to arrange emails for students. I am a little concerned that there may be some backlash to the action we took.

**Second Challenge:** Clint has students with varying degrees of intellectual ability, from “small group” kids, who for the rest of the day are confined to a single room, to gifted students who couldn’t get into the one AC class per grade level that Griffin offers. For some of these students, no matter how well we differentiated the lesson with 12 academic groupings, some of the students took the whole period to log in, get situated, and open up a website to begin research. I learned that patience is a virtue, and that as a coach of teachers and kids, I have to meet people where they are. This lesson was pronounced as I worked with students over the past three days.

**Third Challenge:** On the day we rolled out the technology and gave mini-lessons on each type of technology from which the students could choose (Prezis, Voicethread, Weebly, ToonDoo, and Glogster), the district internet service was extremely slow and “hit or miss” today. Websites were taking inordinate amounts of time to load, searches were slow, and students were getting really frustrated. Fortunately, there was some workability today instead of a total internet crash, but this gave us yet another opportunity to teach students (and remind ourselves) that as fabulous as technology can be, there are those times which are completely out of our control. What we suggested to students after the first period of this prolonged agony, was to work on the executive summaries of their research while they waited for sites to load. This was brilliant planning on our part, to have two parts to the assignment. We did not anticipate this kind of trouble, but having a second application for students to work on enabled us to make the most of our time.

Observing the difference in Clint’s affect while discussing the lesson versus teaching the lesson, it was interesting to note the changes. Clint’s relaxed nonchalance during planning was transformed into a fair amount of frustration when internet problems ensued. However, I also observed how he was able to control his frustration in front of the students and relate to the angst they were feeling. He was able to turn an unfortunate situation around for the students by providing them with compassion and encouragement: a true professional.

As a coach to Clint, I noticed a few areas of his teaching in which he could improve. First, I created a rubric for the students to give out on the day we rolled out the technology piece. Interestingly, Clint did not discuss the rubric with the students upon handing it out. He just gave it to them. Without calling attention to a handout, students will not take the time to read it. I noticed the same thing when he handed the packet of information out to the students at the beginning of the week. He invited them to read it, but didn’t take the time to ensure understanding.

In rolling out the technology, I noticed that Clint did not explain how to register for a particular site or get started. He simply showed models of completed work and expected the students to figure it out on their own. Throughout each class period, students were very needy when working independently, and were constantly raising their hands for help. Kids generally do not understand how to keep on working until they get the help they need, so a great deal of time gets wasted as a result.

In each of these cases, I was there to model best practices, and without having to say anything, in subsequent periods, Clint picked up on my modeling and began implementing the practices himself. When we sit down to discuss the week next Monday, I will bring these things up to him, after raving (of course) about all the wonderful teaching I got to see and experience.

**Conclusion**

At the end of each day Clint and I take a few minutes to discuss our teaching efforts throughout the day. Because we have established a partnership, the comments are well-taken and the interaction is positive. I also ask Clint for feedback on my part of each day, and am able to learn from his feedback as well. A true partnership, as Knight (2007) points out, is definitely the way I feel most comfortable in coaching. It is a win-win situation for each of us involved, and we experience success and a positive lesson in the art of teaching.

References

Knight, J. (2007). *Instructional coaching: a partnership approach to improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press: A SAGE Publications Company.