

**When the Bones are Good the Rest Don't Matter:
A Stable Foundation for Teaching and Instructional Coaching in a
Hybrid Learning Environment**

*Jade Calais, Elizabeth Grossie, Michelle McCoy, Lora Auzenne
University of Louisiana at Lafayette*

The Spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused school districts nation-wide to transition to a “hybrid” or fully online model of schooling (Arizona Department of Education, 2020; California Department of Education, 2020; Virginia Department of Education, 2020). While COVID-19 has significantly impacted schools across the United States, one principle remains immovable during the era of hybrid & online learning: schools must provide high-quality instruction for all students. Inequities have been further exacerbated by remote learning, illuminating the opportunity gap that impedes positive outcomes for historically marginalized groups (Reich, 2020). During late Spring 2020, schools grappled with how to best minimize health risks and combat the effects of unfinished learning resulting from abrupt school closures. The inclusion of remote environments created a need to develop competency and increase capacity throughout various subsystems to ensure student learning. One role that can support teachers during this transition are school-based instructional coaches (ICs). The current climate is ripe for ICs to mobilize and take a leading role during unprecedented times such as what during the Spring 2020 global pandemic.

Keywords: instructional coaching; hybrid teaching; COVID-19 Teaching; technology

Introduction

Because of Covid-19, many school districts are transitioning to a “hybrid” model of schooling, which will employ face-to-face and remote learning (Arizona Department of Education, 2020; California Department of Education, 2020; Virginia Department of Education, 2020;). While Covid-19 has significantly impacted schools across the United States, one principle remains immovable during the era of hybrid learning: schools must provide high quality instruction for all students. Covid-19 has affected the emotional and physical health of

students and staff. Consequently, there will be a need to attend to the instructional needs of learners in addition to social-emotional needs of students, staff, and families when schools reopen.

The New Teacher Project (2018) contends that students in schools lack access to four resources linked to positive student outcomes: “grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations” (p. 4). Inequities have been further exacerbated by Covid-19, illuminating the opportunity gap that impedes positive outcomes for historically marginalized groups (Reich, 2020). Quality remote learning is essential to ensuring that existing achievement gaps do not widen further, especially since students from vulnerable populations fare worse with online learning (Reich, 2020). Schools are grappling with how to best minimize health risks and combat the effects of unfinished learning resulting from abrupt school closures occurring this past spring. The inclusion of remote environments creates a need to develop competency and increase capacity throughout various subsystems to ensure student learning. Teachers are in uncharted territory, as many have primarily taught in face to face environments only.

One role that can support teachers during this transition are school based instructional coaches (ICs). The current climate is ripe for ICs to mobilize and take a leading role during these unprecedented times. A formidable task for instructional coaches transitioning to a blended learning environment will be considering students’ and teachers’ needs and expertise in two concurrent learning environments. Supporting teachers in a remote learning environment will present new challenges. However, with a solid foundation this task becomes more plausible.

Setting the Foundation: The House Don’t Fall When the Bones Are Good - A Personal Vignette

Schooling during Covid-19 is different. Social distancing signs adorn school grounds, smiles and grimaces remain hidden behind a mask, and many students now learn at a computer screen from home for all or part of their schooling. As I begin year 14 in education, I am transitioning from my role as an Instructional Coach and embarking upon this new school reality as a first-year assistant principal. Reflecting on my career in education, the years have been filled with several transitions- moving from a classroom teacher, to a school librarian, to an instructional coach, and now an administrator. But even with these shifts, there has been a

constant. My why and my what have not changed. I want to educate students so that they become the best version of themselves. With the onset of COVID-19 and its negative effects on schools, teachers and students, and society, it is not difficult to lose sight of our why. Sometimes, when the task seems enormous (for instance, educating students during COVID-19), it might be difficult to conjure a plan of action. But as I listened to the radio one afternoon, I was reminded by Maren Morris that “When the bones are good, the rest don’t matter” (Morris, Robbins, & Veltz, 2019).

When there Ain’t a Crack in the Foundation: Foundations of Effective Teaching

The same principles and tasks that teachers must be attuned to in a face to face learning environment are primarily similar in a virtual learning environment. Teachers will have to work to adjust to the shift in context, which will present new challenges: digitizing the curriculum, developing student-centered lessons, scaffolding and questioning, providing accommodations and modifications, pacing, tech assistance, recording lessons, building student relationships, and providing social emotional support. For years, teachers have developed their pedagogical content knowledge to become masters of their trades. Even with a quick transition from in-person learning to a virtual environment, teachers are still mastering their trade. Recalling the pedagogy that made in-person classrooms a rich and inclusive learning environment pre COVID-19 is merely a start to establishing this same atmosphere for remote learning communities.

Teachers must first begin with the very basics in mind: pedagogy, content, and assessment (Harvard, 2020; Lo & Hew, 2017). Research on flipped classrooms and effective online learning environments can provide educators with much support and resources as they navigate this new territory. While scripting the lesson plan to include the necessary content, teachers must keep in mind the effective teaching strategies that worked in their in person classrooms for years such as note-taking, summarizing, questioning, cooperative learning groups, positive reinforcement, student recognition, visuals and illustrations, comparing and contrasting, graphic organizers, and practice (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001).

Harvard University offers valuable advice on creating inclusive and enriching learning environments that will help educators navigate this journey from in person to virtual learning. Learning online is very similar to learning in person; therefore, educators should focus on their pedagogy and content, and not specifically on the virtual instruments needed for this to be delivered (Harvard, 2020).

For example, understanding the specific questions or dialogue that must occur to help a student reach their maximum potential with content would be a start in preparing for learning. Once the educator has weaved these questions or dialogue through the lesson and the teacher feels that this will aid in the students understanding the content, then they will be prepared to plan for the platform or instrument in which these questions or dialogue will occur (Harvard, 2020).

Finding the resources to implement the strategies will then begin. There are many free or low-cost resources that teachers can locate on the internet that may help with enriching the virtual learning environment. For teachers wishing to increase discussion or provide students a platform to discuss their content with the teacher or others, Google Classroom, Google Docs, Edmodo, Padlet, or other discussion boards can be useful. Teachers can post questions that they would commonly use to enrich or scaffold learning within their in-person classrooms and then allow their students to become independent learners through content discourse. Using this understanding of starting with the pedagogy that educators are so familiar with and then navigating the platforms to use to implement these strategies will help educators take the appropriate steps to developing enriching virtual learning experiences.

The way in which teachers interact with students and students interact with each other is changing, not the very basics of effective teaching environments (Harvard, 2020; Lo & Hew, 2017). Some pre-learning activities that can be completed by students during virtual learning days prior to face-to-face instruction include viewing the text, note taking, summarizing, using graphic organizers to gather information, student discussion, developing questions, and online activities that are prerequisite for the in-person learning (Lo & Hew, 2017). Teachers should use the face-to-face time for brief review, explicit instruction, quizzes to assess knowledge, major assessments, individual practice, and individual reinforcement of the skills (Lo & Hew, 2017). After students have participated in the pre-activities and in person instruction/activities, they are prepared for after-instruction activities that can be completed online.

One valuable post-activity is to ask students to video their presentations, which can be posted for others to view or can be viewed during in person days (Low & Hew, 2017). Having students record their presentations reduces the amount of wasted instructional time it takes for students to prepare their presentations, transition, and other hiccups that occur during presentations. Also, students can engage in self-reflection, extended dialogue, creating student

questions or answering student questions, responding to online discussions (either student or teachers led), and extra practice via paper or online (Lo & Hew, 2017).

Educators must remember that they are masters of their trade and have the knowledge to transition from in person to virtual learning. Having a strong pedagogical content knowledge and an open mind will help with this journey. Begin with an understanding of the pedagogy, content, and assessment, as the lesson script will help in developing effective online lessons. Once this script is developed, then educators can gently weave in the online choices that can improve the instruction or help deliver the content. Finding resources, participating in PLCs, and cooperative teacher learning are going to be necessary to reduce the workload and will help with navigating this new territory.

We Built this Right: Solutions for Instructional Coaching in Virtual Learning Environments

When it comes to effective coaching in a virtual or hybrid environment, the process of coaching teachers does not change. Their needs, however, are slightly different. Traditional instructional coaching tasks such as observing and providing feedback, modeling lessons, building and maintaining relationships with teachers, and coaching cycles should still be the main focus when coaching teachers. In a hybrid environment, teachers may need additional support that was not typically needed before. It is the instructional coach's role to consider what new needs may arise in a virtual learning environment and how to provide solutions to those needs.

No, it Don't Always Go the Way We Planned It: A Personal Vignette

Being an instructional coach in the hybrid environment lends itself to seeing teachers' struggles and concerns from a unique perspective. The largest hurdle as an instructional coach is staying aware of the constant changes in policies and procedures regarding hybrid learning. At this point, I have only been able to coach informally through verbal feedback and through lesson plan feedback. While reviewing teachers' lesson plans for face-to-face learning vs. asynchronous distance learning, questions exist. How much pre-learning should be done in relation to asynchronous assignments? Clear messaging from school districts would augment teachers' confidence when making instructional decisions and would also help myself and other instructional coaches feel more confident when advising teachers.

Let it Rain ‘Cause You and I Remain the Same: A Foundation of Effective Instructional Coaching

School based instructional coaches’ primary responsibilities are to provide support to teachers through data analysis, goal setting, sharing instructional strategies, supporting goal attainment, and facilitating professional development (Knight, 2018). This process is not facilitative or directive but evolves dialogically through inquiry and advocacy (Knight, 2019). Instructional coaching is responsive to contextual needs. When considering what types of shifts might occur when ICs transition from supporting teachers in a face-to-face environment to a virtual or hybrid environment, traditional roles of the IC should be considered. Though these roles do not change in the virtual learning environment, the method of delivering these supports might alter.

Principles of change, along with sound instructional practices, and learning in technological environments are all important considerations. Accordingly, instructional coaches can approach their role within this new context using the following frameworks: Concerns-Based Adoption Model, the Impact Cycle for instructional coaching, and the ISTE Standards for Educators (Hall & Hord, 2020; ISTE Standards for Education, 2008; Knight, 2018). Collectively, these frameworks and standards address concerns throughout the change process while emphasizing high impact instructional coaching and collaborative learning in blended learning environments.

Stages of Concern

Although most educational professionals desire to quickly adapt and adjust to new needs, this can prove difficult. An event such as COVID-19 demands swift changes. Although change is often treated as an event, change is a learning process that requires prioritization of needs and time (Hall & Hord, 2020). Consequently, the desire to be comfortable with newly adopted applications and the digitization of all processes and products can be overwhelming to teachers; however, if instructional coaches are attuned to the various stages of concern (SoC), they can readily support teachers throughout the change process. Hall and Hord (2020) identify seven categories of concerns (SoC), ranging from showing little to no concern or involvement with an innovation to embracing and personalizing innovations.

When implementing change, such as transitioning from a 100% face to face learning environment to a virtual or hybrid context, teachers will find themselves at varying stages of

concern. Instructional coaches can assist teachers in reaching the highest SoC by working to avoid a major pitfall and decrease the chances of teachers expressing little attention or concern for change. Too many innovations at one time can result in teachers feeling torn, resulting in a lack of focus on the innovation. With the possibility of managing a virtual learning environment and the influx of technology, teachers can easily become enamored with technological trends du jour. Tools will change. Time has proven this to be true. However, there is one specific that must remain foundational throughout the centuries in regard to technology within our schools. This principle is that curricula and pedagogical content knowledge must drive technology integration. Instructional coaches can ensure that teachers are not overwhelmed and that they transcend the unrelated / unconcerned stage by focusing on the needs of students and allowing these needs to dictate classroom practices.

Impact Cycle and The Big Four

A transition to a virtual or hybrid learning environment still requires ICs to collaborate with teachers in the following areas: (1) content planning, (2) formative assessment, (3) instruction, and (4) community building (Knight, 2018). ICs will have to partner with teachers to increase whole-school competencies and capacities in these aforementioned areas. Although an IC might not have a high capacity in all four areas, it is not needed. Now, more than ever, ICs must mobilize the team of educators and move them towards a common goal: cultivating professional practices to systematically augment the lives of students. Van Tassell notes, “Teachers have a great deal of knowledge about their practice and their students that no one else possesses and that is incredibly valuable to other teachers. Professional development too often ignores teachers’ knowledge of practice, [as] the paradigm of teachers implementing expert-generated ‘best practices’ disempowers teachers” (78). The current changes schools are undergoing will allow a shift within the profession where teachers are empowered through their voice and agency to manage change effectively. Identifying teacher experts on a campus and beyond the school campus will open up a plethora of resources and networks that have been unearthed.

During this time, we are reminded that context does not shift the foundation. Instruction in a hybrid learning environment is very involved; yet, Jim Knight’s framework the Big Four, provides focus for instructional coaches and provides a strategy for interventions. Instructional coaches must model. They must be available to scaffold and support teachers in implementing

strategies from beginning to end- even within a virtual environment. Most importantly, instructional coaches must not only model but observe and provide feedback (Knight, 2007). No matter what, instructional coaches must understand that they have to remain visible in the classrooms. Absence equates to disconnection; therefore, instructional coaches must collaborate with teachers in order to put theory into practice. Furthermore, they must be adept at listening to needs, concerns, and insights of teachers and be adaptable.

ISTE Standards for Educators

Technology is simply a tool that can then be leveraged for students' success (Sheninger, Murray, & Thomas, 2017). Learning is a social endeavor and instruction requires more than simply disseminating and collecting assignments. The ISTE standards for educators call for a change within instructional institutions that change the face of education and bring students to places where they become stewards of the world, problem solvers, and they possess higher order thinking skills that help them navigate through today's ever-changing world (Gilakjani, Leong, & Ismail, 2013; Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). Traditional schooling relies on teacher-centered instruction and teacher-centered decision making (Varier, Dumke, Abrams, Conkin, Barnes, & Hoover, 2017). The ISTE Standards (ISTE, 2019) advocate for educators to revolutionize education by creating learner-centered environments that are supported by technology. Foundational to this standard, the educator as designer, is educators' capacity to "design authentic, learner-driven activities and environments that recognize and accommodate learner variability" (ISTE, 2019). Technology is used as an instructional tool that assists with navigating student learning (Cifuentes, Maxwell, & Bulu, 2011; Niederhauser & Lindstrom, 2006). Learning spaces must be transformed into a place where students become stewards of their own learning by navigating through information and formulate their own understanding of the world (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). The educator then shifts to a facilitator or manager of technology (Niederhauser & Lindstrom, 2006). There are three major sub-standards educators can focus on to achieve this measure: "personalized learning experiences," "authentic learning environments," and "deep learning" (ISTE, 2019).

ICs should consider the learning theory of constructivism as they work alongside teachers to prepare digital and technological lessons that align with the ISTE standards. Constructivism contends that learning is a process of actively constructing ones' knowledge (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). Knowledge is not necessarily acquired, rather it is constructed through collaboration,

exploration, and investigation (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). The teachers' responsibility shifts from the main navigator of knowledge to facilitator of learning (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003), releasing total control over classrooms and empowering students to become stewards of their own knowledge (Gilakjani, Leong, & Ismail, 2013).

To do so with fidelity, educators must carefully consider instructional design principles. When employed strategically and efficiently, technology becomes a powerful cognitive tool that can allow teachers to facilitate learning in authentic contexts while advancing innovative education (Crompton, 2017). These innovative environments require a shift away from conventional teacher roles and a move towards shared responsibility between teachers and students as co-designers of instruction (Anthony, 2019; Bray & McClaskey, 2013). This is an area in which ICs will have to engage teachers in constant, deep discourse.

In order for instructional coaches to feel more comfortable with novice technological tasks within a virtual learning environment, ICs must fully immerse themselves into the same processes teachers will engage in. For example, ICs should plan a virtual lesson him/herself. Just as a teacher in a classroom would study a lesson to anticipate student struggles, instructional coaches should practice creating lessons in order to anticipate teacher struggles. By using digital platforms and applications that are available for their teachers to use, instructional coaches will have a better understanding of what it is like to plan virtual lessons and will understand how to better support their teachers.

Routine, job embedded professional development is a precursor to effective instructional technology growth and proficiency. Therefore, schools must carve out time for professional learning communities, which can support these efforts. Of greater importance is the need to differentiate professional development, considering teacher proficiencies and availability. ICs should assess and survey teachers to understand their needs, interests, and areas of expertise in order to plan and facilitate the necessary professional development. Instructional coaches are a central figure in facilitating technology implementation that can enhance pedagogical practices.

And We're Still Standing: A Teacher's Voice

I have learned the importance of beginning with the knowledge and pedagogy that you possess after spending a month developing highly engaging, hands-on activities and delivering these lessons at a virtual, summer mathematics camp. As educators, we must be flexible and prepared for hiccups. We must know that we have in our possession the full capacity and

knowledge to make this work. From the voice of experience, I developed my lessons as if the students were seeing me face-to-face and then found the resources I would need to execute these lessons online, while keeping in mind that there would be obstacles such as a lack of resources, noise from the home, the need for breaks, and a shyness that would present itself because all students were new to this experience. After spending a week with over seventy campers, I learned that students were more eager to interact, show their intelligence, and had been longing for learning. As a co-constructor of knowledge, you, as an educator, possess the ability to provide this experience for your students. Best wishes on your journey.

Conclusion

The effects of COVID-19 on students and schooling are immeasurable. What educators do to offset the short- and long-term effects of this is crucial to students' social-emotional and academic growth. A solid foundation to weather this storm will emanate from the following: a relationship of mutual trust and respect between teachers and instructional coaches, strong pedagogical content knowledge, and the incorporation of technology to facilitate learning. A hybrid learning environment built upon this foundation will be a solid one. Remember, "the house don't fall when the bones are good" (Morris & Veltz, 2019).

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Author Biographies

Jade Calais is a doctoral student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her research interests include equitable school discipline practices and mothering.

Elizabeth Grossie is a doctoral student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her research interests include mathematical practices and the effects of teacher perception on marginalized students.

Michelle McCoy is a doctoral student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her research interests include culturally relevant pedagogy in the ELA classroom and instructional coaching.

Lora Auzenne is a doctoral student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her research interests include schools in rural areas and educating students who are from impoverished backgrounds.