Utilizing Information Technologies to Support Coaching: Can You Teach an Old Dog New Tricks?

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Technological tools and the connections they offer represent a virtual podium to enhance coaches' roles. They can serve to support professionalism, minimize a sense of isolation, help develop content knowledge, keep coaches informed of innovations (and innovators) in practice, clarify coaches' roles and responsibilities, increase their understanding of engaging presentation methodologies, and offer opportunities to connect with "more competent others" (no matter where they are located)!

In the 2009 Horizon Report, information technologies are referred to as "tools to connect learners and scholars all over the world — online collaborative workspaces, social networking tools, mobiles, voice-over-IP, and more — teaching and scholarship are transcending traditional borders more and more all the time" (p. 5).

Timothy J. Magner, Director of the Office of Education Technology for the U.S. Department of Education, highlights the importance of recognizing how technology tools at our disposal offer us the opportunity to gather and use information from the world around us:

> Technology literacy skills historically have been defined as operational: Can you use the computer, use the mouse? Today though, information literacy skill must build on the operational by focusing on aspects like collection, organization, analysis, and synthesis—understanding what you have, what you can get and what you can do with it. Clearly, you need the operational skills to do the informational piece, but the emphasis should be on the latter. (qtd. in Trotter, 2009)

Cummins, Brown, and Sayers (2007) express this same sentiment by pointing out that "it is clearly relevant and valuable for teachers and students to know how to make a web page or create PowerPoint presentations. But a focus on these technical skills in isolation ignores fundamental issues of what content is worth presenting by means of these tools, for what purpose, and to which audiences" (p. v-vi).

As noted in the International Reading Association's Standards for Reading Professionals (2007) coaches are in a position to "provide essential leadership for the school's entire literacy program by helping create and supervise a long-term staff development process that supports both the development and implementation of the literacy program over months and years" (Category III, bullet 2). Part of our collective and individual responsibility should include learning to traverse the new 2.0 literacy so that we can better prepare teachers and students to navigate successfully in our connected world. Literacy 2.0 is defined by Reeves (2009) as "the social and technological phenomenon that enables users to generate content, interact, and share information across borders" (p. 87).

Recently, while working together on a collaborative project, a colleague made the comment, "What did we ever do before GOOGLE?" I can't imagine it, can you? And yet, not so many years ago, most of us couldn't envision surfing the web to find nuggets of knowledge at our fingertips -- including information we didn't know we needed -- and communicating instantaneously with people half way around the world, or in the office next door!

No one has ever described me as a techie. I think of myself as "technologically hesitant." I don't actively turn my back on innovation, but I tend to take my time while the new routines and tools earn a place in my daily routine. In this brief I share insights and resources that may be helpful to those trying to learn new tricks, and for others who are well on their way to dealing with their own technology reticence. First, let me describe the following technological tools: Listserv, Podcasting, PortaPortal, Twitter, and Webinar.

Listserv: An electronic mailing list that allows you to participate in online conversations with colleagues. It also provides a forum to create, manage, and control online communities.

Podcasting: In his column, Ed-Tech Talk on teachers.net, Rob Reilly (2008) defines a podcast as an "audio file saved in digital format, much like a Word document that you have created and saved on your computer; both are digital files. But instead of written words on an electronic piece of paper, a podcast has spoken words on a piece of electronic paper (so to speak). When you load a podcast and play it, the computer will run software that will allow the podcast to speak-its-piece" (para. 5).

PortaPortal: Software that allows you to save your "bookmarks" (or favorite internet links) on more than one computer so that you can share them with others.

Twitter: A "social network" defined on its' website as "a service for friends, family, and co–workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?" (Twitter.com, Homepage).

Webinar: Also called e-learning, (or webcasts) a webinar is a presentation delivered over the internet and the phone.

Weblog: Richardson (2006) defines a blog as "an easily created, easily updateable website that allows an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection (p. 17). He notes that it is comprised of reflections and conversations that are updated regularly and engage readers with ideas, questions, links, and asks the audience to think and respond.

Wiki: An electronic workroom – an online space designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content.

I find that the following guidelines articulated by Julie Coiro (2005) in the book *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education* provide good advice to those who are interested in giving technology its due (p. 212). I will highlight some of her observations as a platform to share personal experiences and to outline helpful resources that may be of interest as well.

Start out small and move through stages.

My first "laptop" was an IBM. It looked like a traveling salesman suitcase with the heft of three bowling balls. Shortly after the purchase, I had an appointment to get my car repaired at the dealership and a writing deadline at work. I packed up my new computer, strapped it to the dolly to take to the car (just kidding – it was heavy, but not that heavy!) and spent a few hours diligently working in the repair shop waiting room. I was able to refer to files, write new text, and revise at will. Spell check - my goodness, "manna from heaven!" My office was portable; albeit cumbersome. It was the first time that I had direct experience with the power of technology to make aspects of my job more effective, efficient, and fun!

In the years since, my "portable office" has become remarkably streamed lined, and I have come to realize that with technology, like a lot of things in life, you don't have to learn everything and you certainly don't have to learn it all at once. In addition to understanding how technology can support and enhance your work, surround yourself with people who know things you don't know, and whose needs, interests, and knowledge, inspire you to extend beyond your current inclination – in some cases way beyond your current predilection.

The following resources have been, and continue to be helpful to me as I move through stages of understanding and implementation:

1. Start by exploring the online resources of the professional organizations to which you belong. For example, The National Council for Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the National Staff Development Council all offer online support on content (literacy), process (coaching to support content acquisition), and technological tools to enhance your work.

2. Find a technology mentor, someone you admire, who uses technology to support their own learning, and who is accessible to you.

3. Sign on to listservs that keep you in the loop on issues related to content, process, and the supportive tools at our disposal (reminder; check your professional organizations). In addition here are a few other sources to get you started.

   - **National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)**; http://www.nifl.gov/forums.html
     Hosts many listservs that you can subscribe to including; "Equipped for the Future," English as a Second Language" and "Focus on Basics."

   - **Mosaic of Thought**; http://www.readinglady.com/mosaic/tools/tools.htm
     Conversations, tools, and techniques shared by educators who use the book; Mosaic of Thought by Keene and Zimmerman.

   - **MiddleWeb**; http://www.middleweb.com/mw/aaAboutMW.html
     Conversation, information and online support.

Take a few risks along the way.

A "risk" means different things to different people. For example, taking a risk might include signing up for an online course, posting a comment on one of the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse forums, starting your own blog, or committing to learning how to integrate video clips into your PowerPoint presentations. Generally speaking, taking risks requires trying something new even though you don't know the result. It involves dealing with the subsequent ambiguity and anxiety that goes hand in hand with stepping outside of your comfort zone.

As a coach, I'm in the position of taking my own professional risks as well as supporting others who seek to do the same. Here are some suggestions to guide you:

1. Join Twitter or another social network. Dr. Jim Knight introduced me to this forum @ http://twitter.com/ where a group of coaches share quick glimpses of what they are up to, and often share information about resources of interest. Checking in with my online colleagues never fails to inspire me and takes very little time out of my day.

2. Be clear about what you need. In other words, don't just "adopt" a tool because it's cool – think about what you do and ask questions about what tools exist to help you do your job better. I have found that this results in true integration of the technology, rather than just a passing interest.

3. Follow a blog. Reading about the work of others and "seeing" their reflections online encourages me to try new ways of doing things. The following list includes some blogs you could follow:

- **Literacy Coaches: the Professional Networking Site for Literacy Coaches**; http://literacycoaches.ning.com/
- **WNY Associates**; http://www.angelastockman.com/blog/
- **Literacy Coaching: Stories from Schools**; http://literacycoachingservices.blogspot.com
- **K-12 Literacy Coach**; http://literacycoachonline.wordpress.com/
- **Coaching Chronicles**; http://coachingchronicles.blogspot.com/
- **Living Literacy** - Dianne Hartness, High School Coach with the South Carolina Reading Initiative; http://nhsdhartness.blogspot.com/2008/04/19-minutes-as-literacy-Coach.html
- **Literacy Coach**; http://literacycoaching.typepad.com/
- **Instructional Coaching**; http://jimknightoncoaching.squarespace.com/
- **21st Century Learning**, Sheryl Nussbaum Beach; http://21stcenturylearning.typepad.com
- **The Literacy Coaching Continuum**, Mary Catherine Moran' blog; http://coachingcontinuum.typepad.com/

Take a proactive approach to learning.

My mother was a high school English teacher. One of the lasting impressions I have of her as a professional is the time and care she took in preparing her lessons. While her official work day may have ended at 3:30 p.m. (and she had 7 children of her own to contend with) she never stopped reflecting on how her instruction could be improved to meet the needs of her students. As a result I tend to seek colleagues who exemplify the term; "lifelong learner." I find their en-

thusiasm and curiosity infectious, and they work to fuel my own efforts to be proactive in my approach to learning. To this end I attempt to do the following:

1. Surround myself with people who are positive and optimistic about the work in which they are involved. I try to go to at least one on-site conference a year because I find that certain forums tend to attract the "movers and shakers" in the field. For a list of conferences and meeting relevant to your work as a coach, go to the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse homepage at http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/

2. Go back to the classroom as often as possible. As an educator who is not classroom based it's important for me to spend time in schools with students and teachers. Better yet, seek out classrooms to visit where teachers are actively engaging students using technological tools. Inspiration is sure to follow.

3. Bring new meaning to your "New Year's Resolution." I'm a list maker and I find it helpful to articulate a focus for my learning. By saying it aloud, writing it down, and researching a list of potential supports, I am more apt to get it done. Some potential supports include online webinars and podcasts that highlight best practice. The following includes a list of a few webinars and podcasts for your interest.

- **Schools Moving Up**; http://www.schoolsmovingup.net (Webinars)
- **Reading Rockets**; http://www.readingrockets.org/podcasts/ (Podcasts and Webinars)
- **Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative**; http://www.pacoaching.org/ (Podcasts)

Encourage your students to share their expertise & never underestimate the power of collaboration.

There isn't anything more powerful than "seeing and hearing" about the work of our colleagues to inspire innovation in our own practice. Technology allows us to visit classrooms and speak to colleagues and experts about practice, even when they in other parts of the world. The March 2009 issue of Educational Leadership (ASCD) focuses on Literacy 2.0 and presents articles of policy makers and practitioners from around the country. Additionally, check out the following resources to explore this thread of thought:

- **Teacher Tube** – Educators share examples of practice via online video downloads; http://www.teachertube.com/index.php
- **Blogging IT and EDucation**, Emma Duke-Williams; http://userweb.port.ac.uk/~duke-wie/blog/
- **100,000 heads are better than one (2007)**; www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitatedtoolkit & www.ncsl.org/uk.communities

- **Technology for Training, Technical Assistance, and Strategic Communication**; http://www.dec_sped.org/uploads/docs/conferences/2008_handouts/Edelman%20Technology%20Post%202.pdf

Seek authentic learning experiences

This notion harkens back to what I wrote earlier about choosing technological tools that meet an expressed need, rather than just choosing gadgets because they are cool. "Cool" is often a nice by-product, but when building a "relationship" with technology, I find that I'm more motivated to keep plugging away at my learning, if I know that it will be well worth my time in the end. How do you learn to design a PowerPoint presentation? You design a PowerPoint presentation! In this scenario, the process becomes as important, if not more important than the product. Authenticity in the alignment of coaching and technology relies on an apprenticeship model -- not just talking about best practice, but engaging in it on a daily basis with our colleagues.

In a recent presentation to graduate students I was sharing internet resources that I thought might be helpful to the participants. Generally I type up a list of links to share as a handout and then during the session I "show" the sites to the audience. I have to say that I've been quite pleased with this process in the past, considering it a nice blend of old time presentation style and new technology! This time around one of my students said, "Are you familiar with PortaPortal?" When I responded in the negative, she walked us all through the process of posting favorite links to a site that can then be accessed by "guests" that I tell about the site. All in all, a much better option than my handout routine, and one that can be updated on a regular basis and organized according to the audience with whom I will be working. Additionally it models the use of technology in an authentic setting.

The following list contains a few resources that may be helpful as you strive to model the effective use of technology in the work that you do:

- **Presentation Zen**; http://www.presentationzen.com/
- **Blog Decker**; http://www.bertdecker.com/
- **Classroom 2.0**; http://www.classroom20.com/
- **PortaPortal**; http://www.portaportal.com/

President Obama has been described as our first "wired president." In the vernacular of my day, "wired" referred to someone who had had a few too many cups of coffee. In a recent CNN interview Obama (2009) said that he hoped, despite the obvious considerations for security, that he would be able to keep one of his blackberries. As he explained, "I want to be able to have voices, other than the people who are immediately working for me, be able to reach out and – and send a message about what's happening in America" (Politico.com, para. 4).

Coiro's advice on how to support and maximize the use of technological tools by starting out small and in stages, taking risks, being proactive, encouraging sharing of expertise, collaborating, and emphasizing authentic learning opportunities, suggests a venue for increasing our own comfort level with Literacy 2.0 tools and techniques. It also provides us with a helpful framework for mapping out the work that we do as coaches.

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