Reflections from an eLearning Coach

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For over six years, I have worked as an eLearning Coach in Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development schools in two major projects. From 2005 to 2007, I was a Development Manager for the Yarra Valley eLearning Community (YVeLC) where I had the incredible opportunity of working in a 14 coach team across 7 secondary schools. The driving vision of this project was “to use the development and implementation of an e-rich environment to drive significant improvement in Teacher Effectiveness and School Effectiveness” (Yarra Valley eLearning Community, 2004, p. 8). For the last three and a half years, I have been an Ultranet Coach for 27 primary and secondary schools, promoting the collaborative and interactive resource capabilities of the Ultranet.

During both projects, I was able to provide professional development sessions and follow up directly with teachers to support them in their classrooms with a number of innovations including: Collaborative Projects, WebQuests, Digital Stories, Digital Portfolios, SuperclubsPlus, Claymation, Wikis and Classroom Blogs. My 6 years of experience working and researching across these school networks has led me to the conclusion that there are three critical factors which need to be met in order to achieve effective, sustained professional learning and the adoption of new practices including support from school leadership, effective coaching and trusting relationships.

Support from school leaders
Success of professional learning through coaching is greatest when there is support from leaders who share the vision, support risk taking and ensure adequate technical support. One Teacher eLearning Coach supported this notion of empowering leadership in saying, “Our principal has really been a great advocate of progressing in eLearning, and that’s certainly helped my job as coach…”. Another Teacher Learning Coach explained that, “It varied over the project how smoothly it ran, and that it really depended on school leadership, ICT leadership, and who were our technicians in the school.” It is evident that, leaders including ICT Leaders also affect the success of initiatives and new practices.

Hartnell-Young’s (2006) research explored roles of teachers and characteristics of communities of practice in classrooms in 12 primary and secondary schools and acknowledged that, “while such projects were initiated and driven by individuals and groups of teachers, their success required support through school leadership...” (p. 461). Leaders enabled innovation where they were able to share a clear vision, creating an environment of risk-taking, giving staff meeting time for professional learning and negotiating positive rewards for making changes. Principals and eLearning Leaders enabled new practices by supporting the eLearning coaching programs and ensuring adequate technical support.

Effective Coaching
Teacher Professional Learning through the ‘brokering’ of new eLearning practices occurred in the Yarra Valley eLearning Community of schools through coaches. Hartnell-Young (2006) explains that; “Brokers are those people... able to make connections across communities of practice and open new possibilities for meaning” (p. 465). Many teachers network in
this way with other teachers to adopt best practices across schools, for example, through literacy and numeracy groups or through subject associations. This is valuable because teachers become exposed to what teachers are doing in other schools.

A coach in a YVeLC school thought that, “It was a very powerful experience to collaborate with everybody… We were being exposed to new things and new ways of doing things. So … and people helped each other… we gave PD to each other… went to each other’s schools. It was highly collaborative and highly supportive”. Theses coaches were able to “develop shared practices around the enterprise of brokering” (Wenger, 1998, p. 110). The coaches in YVeLC met regularly and shared resources and ways of doing things between the different schools’ communities of practice.

Another coach explained the process in this way, “Either the development manager who had run the session would come to the school and work with them, or the learning coach in their own school would sit down and actually work with them as they thought through how it actually was going to look and work in their own classroom. And I think that that was really important.” This method of blended formal and informal professional learning was an ongoing program tailored to the needs and contexts of schools and individual teachers about how to teach with technology rather than teaching one-off skills.

The kinds of practices developed as new repertoires and shared ways of doing things in both projects were developing a student centred e-rich curriculum, a culture of attending professional learning and inviting eLearning coaches to plan with and implement the changes in the classroom. School leaders are increasingly recognizing the benefits of on-site professional learning with individual follow-up available to teachers.

**Trusting Relationships**

Relationships and trust developed with coaches is essential to developing new practices (shared repertoires) in and across communities of practice through Teacher Professional Learning. The Project Coordinator encapsulates this, “… it was really interesting over time to watch how… those relationships between people developed… I developed really strong relationships with the coaches and development managers, and the unique set of skills that came out of that was just phenomenal, it just grew year after year.”

A coach mentioned how having trust supported the process, “I suppose I was lucky in that I was at a school that I knew the staff really well and they knew me and trusted me so that when I went in … I really had relationships with most of the staff, so I think that makes a big difference, … they knew they could trust me and I’m very patient and try not to be judgmental”.

In a study on the adoption of WebCT at Monash University, Samarawickrema & Stacey (2007, p. 313), explain that “as innovation adoption is often uncertain and risky, participants sought support from trusted peers and professionals” and that “participants who had strong social networks and belonged to collegial learning groups demonstrated higher levels of adoption than those who were more isolated”. Teachers who developed or had trusting relationships with learning coaches were able to more readily take on new practices and shared repertoires.

It is with some sadness and some excitement that I move from the government schools sector into the higher education sector. I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to learn from all the teachers and the students from all the classrooms I have shared. There are many contributing factors in sustainable innovation in education and what constitutes effective professional learning than can be mentioned here. My experience and research over six years does reveal that the key factors that support sustained professional learning are support from leadership, effective coaching and trusting relationships.

**References**


