Chapter 10
Virtual Mentoring: A Response to the Challenge of Change

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter mentoring is defined as a sustained relationship between reflective practitioners. The purpose of this relationship is to build capacity to manage the complex classroom environment in ways that bring about instructional improvements. Where there is a difference in experience between these practitioners, what matters for the mentor’s effectiveness is expertise with applying reflective practices. Reflective practices within a virtual (distance) mentoring setting are identified and explored. Developing trust from a distance and understanding representational preferences are essential virtual mentoring practices. These practices were developed as ways to provide ongoing support to field-based instructional coaches charged with improving mathematics and science instruction in South Carolina middle schools. They are applicable in any P-12 classroom mentoring setting.

INTRODUCTION

We are a pragmatic bunch. We have to be. Our charge is to improve instruction in each and every public school in South Carolina that will have us. Increasingly, those that will have us are in dire straits. Our middle school work, funded by Mathematics & Science Partnership grants, takes us to schools with an average poverty rating, based on Free/Reduced Lunch qualifications, of over 50%. Nearly every school with which we work has not met its Annual Yearly Progress goals and thus faces negative consequences if student achievement does not quickly show gains. The lessons we have learned about virtual mentoring are learned by doing, not via a comprehensive literature review and controlled research design.

In setting out to share what we know, we take aim directly at where our credibility lies; experiences, “best practices” and pragmatic viewpoints. We also seek to inform the audience of professionals working daily in the P-12 environment.
This is the audience we know best. Within this book there are other chapters that balance out our pragmatism with learning theories, rigorous experimental design and deep knowledge about what has been researched. That’s not us. We are well informed, but by choice we are action researchers with a heavy emphasis on action. Our actions are about facilitating positive change.

Change? It’s a pervasive theme in the lives of educators. “We have to change _____.” “Isn’t it time we changed _____?” “Why are we still doing _____? We will bet you can easily fill in the blanks with exasperated pleas for change that you have heard in your own school. So, with all the cries for change in the classroom, how do we work together to make good choices about what to do? How do we avoid being overwhelmed by an education environment that demands never-ending flexibility? How do we overcome the urge to change right back once a change has been made? Why is a chapter on virtual mentoring starting with change anyway?

According to Kegan and Lahey, the “challenge of change…is often misunderstood as the need to better ‘deal with’ or ‘cope with’ the greater complexity of the world” (2009, P. 11). Yes, the educational world is constantly growing more complex. It is not sufficient, however, just to deal with change. We must develop mental capabilities to view the world clearly through an increasingly more complex lens.

Mentoring is one response to the challenge of change. It is purposeful action to promote the growth in the cognitive complexity of educators seeking to manage constantly changing school environments.

Our journey in mentoring instructional coaches in South Carolina schools began in 2003 with a face-to-face training and support model developed by the South Carolina Department of Education’s Mathematics and Science Unit (now known as S*MART Centers SC). Scaling up this face-to-face coaching effort proved to be a daunting task. Geography and numbers overwhelmed our best efforts to stay in constant face-to-face contact with our coaches as the initiative spread across our state. With the support of a Math Science Partnership grant from our state we began to explore virtual strategies in place of some of the face-to-face support built into our original coach-training model.

Mentoring, whether face-to-face or virtual, begins and ends with reflective practice.

**METHOD**

**Part 1: Beginning with the End in Mind**

The reflective practitioner. To manage a changing environment in ways that bring about improved instruction and increased student achievement requires an increasingly complex pattern of thinking and acting. Reflection grooms educators to extend learning beyond specific events and make generalizations to guide future decisions. Costa and Garmston (2002), identify five energy sources, called States of Mind, in their Cognitive CoachingSM model. These States of Mind are mental abilities that guide reflective, intentional decision-making. Like most any mental ability, these too can be enhanced with guided practice. While we employ both the practice strategies and terminology of Cognitive CoachingSM our context is rather specific. The reflective practitioners of interest to us are teachers, instructional coaches, and our own selves too. Thus, our operational definitions of these mental abilities for reflection, as seen in Table 1, are more focused on instruction in schools.

To manage a changing environment in ways that bring about improved instruction and accelerated student achievement also requires dedication to making meaning from the myriad of events, actions and activities that make up a typical school day. Nieto (2003), reminds us that, “Given the dynamics of their work,” teachers “need to continually rediscover who they are and what they