

The Telephone Teleconference Revisited

Using "talking boxes" to connect far-flung teachers, a university faculty helped teachers persevere with new teaching strategies and learn to coach and support one another.

Montana has miles and miles of miles and miles between people, between school districts, between the universities and those who would benefit from courses, and between teachers who could benefit from one another's experiences. Teachers frequently travel great distances to campuses for summer courses and attend extension classes when they are offered. But the lack of inservice opportunities during the school year is aggravated by the fact that among teachers, including those in Montana, there is little tradition of peers sharing ideas and skills.

The College of Education at Montana State University has been offering courses on Models of Teaching (Joyce and Weil 1980) for several years. Models of Teaching are a set of generic teaching strategies developed out of the educational literature of the '60s. Each skeletal model offers an instructional strategy that can address a variety of learning objectives across subject areas and teaching levels. The models have the potential to increase the ways materials can be presented to learners. Although effectively trained teachers in the class have been able to apply a model in a microteaching setting or in a regular classroom, research has indicated that, even after a successful learning experience, teachers often fail to meld a new model into their repertoire of teaching strategies. For example, they may use it once or twice but become frustrated when it is not as comfortable as the tried and true. Teachers then reject what they have

learned and return to their previous repertoire.

Peer Coaching Supports New Thinking

To fully adopt a new technique, most teachers need to work together in what Joyce and Showers (1982) have called a "coaching relationship." In a coaching relationship, Showers (1985) says, teams of teachers regularly observe one another's teaching and provide feedback.

Coaching appears to be most appropriate when teachers wish to acquire unique

configurations of teaching patterns and to master strategies that require new ways of thinking about learning objectives and the processes by which students achieve them.

Such collaboration remains quite foreign to most schools, and many administrators would find it unusual for teachers to propose that the school facilitate regular visits to one another's classrooms. Where administrators support and encourage it, and where teachers assume responsibility for collectively improving their practice, however, coaching relationships have become important factors in staff de-



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velopment. Coaching relationships provide companionship during the uncomfortable period of beginning to implement a new strategy, and a coach can give technical feedback, analysis, and help in adapting new models to a particular school's setting and purposes (Joyce and Showers 1985).

Applying what is known about changing teacher behavior, the 1985 summer Institute on Instructional Skills incorporated three components: quality training, establishment of coaching relationships, and follow-up. Participants from the same schools registered as pairs or trios so they could form coaching teams. The student teams worked together to learn two models. The course used lecture, demonstrations, classroom video vignettes, video presentations and discussions by Joyce, repeated planning, and practice sessions using micro-teaching with feedback to guide teachers to approximate the models more closely in successive teaching trials. Skill assessment indicated that all but one student understood both models thoroughly. Students demonstrated that they could plan and implement the model for a variety of school topics, and expressed their commitment to carry on what they had learned at the summer institute. Student gratification could not have been higher. All 21 items on the course evaluation questionnaire were in the ninth decile.

Encouragement from a Talking Box

But what about follow-up? When teleconferencing was suggested, the first thought was, "A talking box? That would be deadly!"

On second thought, however, we reassessed how teleconferencing could meet our needs. The School of Nursing had been effectively using teleconferencing for inservice training across the breadth of the state. Their classes were didactic in nature, and while the administration had developed several supporting strategies, the major difficulty was maintaining interest. The Institute on Instructional Skills had already jumped that hurdle

because participants had completed the expository, demonstration, and lecture phase of instruction. The purpose of the follow-up was to clarify problems, fine tune skills, encourage teachers to continue to practice, and to exchange information with a peer about applying the models and developing coaching strategies.

Face-to-face conferencing is the best way to exchange ideas, experiences, and insights. Teleconferencing, however, offered a medium available to a dispersed group of teachers during the academic year. The initial requirement that registrants be paired and have the opportunity to try out a teleconferencing follow-up won the approval of reviewers on the Unique Summer Offerings Committee, and the course was funded.

Receiving funding approval was just the first challenge. Enrolling a minimum number of students from the Institute to justify the course came next. For some students, the additional costs precluded their registering. Direct student costs for extended studies courses are slightly higher than tuition and fees for on-campus courses. The teleconference added additional costs for long distance telephone charges for each session and for rental and shipping of the teleconference conveners. We encouraged potential participants to ask their school districts to cover the cost of the telephone, and some districts did so. Other students paid the charges themselves. The university covered rental and shipping because the course was experimental. Twelve persons enrolled.

Turning a Liability into an Asset

A next critical challenge was to offer a quality teleconference seminar that could achieve the intended goals and satisfy students. For the university, goals included helping participants to continue to use the models, improve coaching skills, and fine-tune the strategies so they fully transferred into the "teaching soul" of the learners. Teleconferencing was unusual enough to the district teachers and the university instructor so that it held a high degree

of initial interest. Moreover, the participants were committed to the project and to making it successful.

We were able to turn a liability—the electronic communication of coaching skills—into an asset. Participants were required to send written coaching comments to the instructor, who forwarded them to the intended person at another location. While the process was cumbersome, it gave the instructor an opportunity to monitor the comments and to design information on coaching skills so that it could be given to the class to improve coaching where it was most needed. In effect, it allowed for the coaching of coaching. If students had coached face-to-face, eavesdropping on the process would have been threatening and awkward. The teleconferencing technique turned a procedural intrusion into an instructional benefit.

We can say that a set of not-so-peculiar circumstances came together to demonstrate an exciting new use of telephone teleconferencing for inservice teacher education. Those circumstances included: a course through which to systematically instruct learners in specific teaching strategies, the need to assure that the strategies were applied in the classroom; facilities for teleconferencing, and commitment by a critical number of teachers to use strategies and facilities to improve their craft. □

James G. Hauwiler is associate professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Department of Elementary Education, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717.

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