Coaching Journal

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Coaching Session 1: 8.31.2016

Strategies

The participants for this session on Google Apps for Education and eClass (D2L) were new hires for the 2016-17 school year. These staff members all received orientation letters within a few days of being hired at McConnell Middle School last summer and had also attended a half-day training session the week before school began. The orientation email they received over the summer contained instructions for logging into their school account, links to the faculty handbook, the staff calendar and a virtual "new staff" classroom. Inside the virtual classroom they found assignments and training videos that they were encouraged to look over. By the time the participants walked into this second face-to-face session they had all completed their assignments from the new staff classroom. As in the past, most participants came with experiences and very specific questions which were focused at a much higher operational level than during their orientation. This is one of the reasons that I traditionally enjoy this session so much each year. By this time the new staff members and I have had time to learn many of each other's quirks. Over the last couple of weeks they have all had at least one private coaching session with me and, more importantly, they have all had a chance to work with their students, various applications and discover their own unique strengths and problems. Another side benefit for me is that, by this time, the group always has ideas on how to improve some component of the new staff training which I collect in a survey after the last new staff session.

While there was no enrollment option given as attendance was mandatory for these staff members, I would still label this as a coaching session as every participant was at a different

place and had different needs. There were a few tools (such as an eClass and Google Classroom introduction) that were presented to the whole group. However, this brief whole group instruction quickly diverged as each individual quickly determined how, or even whether, they wish to use these tools. This can be quite challenging although, as I told my teachers, no more challenging than the sort of differentiation they are expected to demonstrate every day. Some time was spent allowing each participant to share their experiences good and bad thus far. Even though their is a discussion forum in the new staff classroom, they tend to open up more in these face-to-face sessions. I put this down to both a reluctance to put some negative things in writing in the discussion forum (which the entire leadership team has access to) and the tendency for people to naturally feed off of each other when discussing things while physically in a room together.

Skill and Affective Changes

Each year these groups have seemed to me, in general, to grow younger and more tech savvy. This means I have to prepare more than ever to stay a step ahead of their questions and ideas. This year I have two new hires who are unusually familiar with technology solutions. The first is a young woman who is starting a second career after working as a technical writer for a software company. The second savvy, new employee is a man who formerly worked in military intelligence. He comes to us with significant database experience and skills. He also, obviously, has a very advanced facility with statistics. I have already asked him to join our school's data team and both of these employees would make fine candidates for our Techno-buddies group. (edit - As I expected they have both since been nominated by existing group members.) The difference these two individuals make in the group chemistry has really ratcheted up the level of

training. I could literally see the fear in two of the participant's eyes when either of my two, newest, high-flyers asked questions at an advanced level. In at least one case the question seemed to be a veiled attempt at showing off and I quickly suggested that we table that question until I could do some research.

Reflection on Challenges and Solution

During this session, as alluded to earlier, my biggest challenge was to make sure that the less experienced employees were not left behind or allowed to feel intimidated. I asked to take the discussion of topics that were too far above the mean operating level of the group offline. However, there was one participant whose apparent experience was so far below the mean that it threatened to derail the others. I, therefore, decided to leverage the most experienced member, who did not instruction in the current topic, in helping to coach the struggling member. Once, after trying unsuccessfully to help this struggling teacher work through a step, I partnered the young woman with a background in technical writing with the struggling staff member and within a few minutes the struggling staff member had mastered the skill. This teaming had the added benefit of setting the stage for the collaborative climate I try to encourage in every staff interaction. With more than one hundred staff members to support, attempting to own all of the professional development or nursing a fragile ego would be a serious liability. Our partnership, I stressed, must be as equals and never be allowed to become paternalistic.

Coaching Session 2: 9.07.2016

Strategies

The participant for this session was a teacher who had signed up for an overview of creating and using rubrics in eClass (D2L). Enrollment was handled in much the way that Knight

(2007) outlines in our textbook. This teacher completed a needs assessment which pointed to a weakness with eClass (D2L) tools in general. This teacher and I then met to talk about goals for the year and where I might provide the most useful support. Together we reached consensus on a commitment to use eClass at least once a week to introduce and assess a topic. After moving some instructional reading materials which were already available from the online textbook into her course shell, we agreed to meet and work on an assessment and rubric. For my part I assured her that the electronic rubric would make her assessments far easier to evaluate. I asked her to have a document with all of her main criteria prepared for our next meeting.

Skill and Affective Changes

As I walked in the door, I knew this would be a difficult session. The teacher had created a hand-written rubric on paper. The rubric was very detailed and she was willing to retype but I asked her indulgence to give optical character recognition with one of our tablets first. A little less than ten minutes later we had a Google Doc open on her laptop and we were ready to go. With her laptop plugged into the projector I took my favored place in a student desk and asked her to put her course shell into edit mode. After a couple of minor missteps which she was able to self-correct, the rubric tool was open and she was pasting in the text from her Google Doc. We went over the semantic quirks in D2L and she was invited to translate them into teacher speak. She was able to find her existing assessment and attach the new rubric with very minimal guidance.

Reflection on Challenges and Solution

eClass is always a challenge to coach teachers through. There is far too little skill transfer and interface conventions in the tools. This causes a great deal of stress for teachers who want to

understand the application and are met with obfuscation at every other turn. I emphasize that this is a case where results count far more than the process. After running back through the steps we took to our content into the rubric tool another teacher on her team wandered in to ask an unrelated question. The interloper expressed interest in leveraging the rubric tool so I asked my teacher to walk her through the steps to create a new rubric. She was clearly nervous but excited as she walked back through the steps. She only had one small stumble and, after it was all over I pronounced her a rubric ninja as I got up to go. She thanked me and I did my best to reinforce that this was my job and our partnership was not finished and that, in fact, this was only the beginning.

Coaching Session 3: 10.26.2016

Strategies

The participants for this session on using Google Forms for formative assessment were members of my techno-buddies group. This is a long-running group here at McConnell Middle School. It is comprised of volunteers who have demonstrated proficiency with technology in some significant way. In fact, several members of this group have gone on to become technology coordinators at other schools. The group is, at this point, almost self organizing and I have added two additional teachers this year based on recommendations from the existing group members and my own observations. The voluntary nature of this commitment is important as members are expected to stay well ahead of the pack with their skills, evangelize technology, and act as a front line in troubleshooting problems. It is not a small commitment and over the years I have been able to offer them a stipend or small reward for their service. At this point they are all serving without compensation. The partnership between the technology department and the

techno-buddies is both implicit and explicit. They have expectations in the level and priority of

the training they receive and, in turn, they have stated responsibilities. This is an ideal group to

act as evangelists as all are exemplary teachers who are highly respected. This is not by accident.

These are parameters that have always factored heavily into accepting a candidate.

Skill and Affective Changes

During this meeting we looked at the new "assessment" features in Forms and went back

over the basics of Form creation. We also discussed integration with Google Classroom. While

going over the Classroom integration I had an anticipated challenge with an older teacher (he is

roughly my age) who has been a member of this group from the beginning. He was having a very

difficult time distinguishing between the Google Sheet which is spawned by the form itself and

Classroom's assessment report which only contains manually entered grades. As the the two of

us have skewed further and further north of the mean age in this group, there have been more and

more grumblings about his membership. However, the man is a master teacher who is deeply

committed to his students. His instructional insight is worth far more than the time his questions

cost. In short he exemplifies everything I want our group to represent and, as I often remind the

younger teachers, the patience they practice with them will serve them well as they among the

rest of the staff coaching others.

Reflection on Challenges and Solution

This session and, indeed, most sessions with this group tend to be chaotic at times. Part of

this is my refusal to take centerstage for too long at these meetings. We have email, a listserv and

our discussion forum where I can pontificate or share my ideas. This group's time is precious

and, I firmly believe that it needs to serve the group as a whole. The other reason that I have

become a little more tolerant of chaos is that I am slowly trying to generate more and more

acceptance among my staff for non-traditional classroom behaviours. Modeling an active

classroom with several groups working on different tasks at the same time is a subtle way to

show these teachers that work is still being accomplished and, perhaps, attaining a higher degree

of authenticity when we allow people to communicate directly and enthusiastically.

  As the members were leaving I experienced one of those wonderful moments that make

this the best job around. My newest and youngest team member waited behind to ask a couple of

questions about a training document I had recently released on using Google Forms to create an

electronic rubric similar to the one available in eClass. As I went over a couple of points the

master teacher (whose room we were meeting in) stopped what he was doing and came over to

ask a couple of questions of his own and an exchange soon began. The exchange was collegial,

respectful and spirited and, I believe, sparked a new friendship between a master teacher and an

enthusiastic new hire. This conversation only ended after the final bus call came over the

intercom.

References

Knight, J. (2007). Instructional Coaching: a Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.