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Co-Innovating a Paradigm Shift from a Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented upheaval of the traditional teaching context. Fortunately, disruptions can also catalyze innovations as they cause the field to re-examine its assumptions and practices. Re-thinking how we mentor pre-service and early-service teachers is one area that shows particular promise for improving teaching. I cite examples from my experience as a mentor teacher and a teacher educator to question traditional models of mentoring that inhibit innovation, collaboration, and reflective practice. Tools and routines that explicitly draw out the assets each member brings to the teaching dyad are needed to address the challenges of our current context, encourage thoughtful instructional change, and build teacher agency and collaboration.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting shift to emergency distance learning devastated the normal teaching context, demanding an immediate re-evaluation of well-honed strategies and practices. Many districts adopted do-no-harm policies to avoid penalizing students for their lack of access to web-enabled devices and/or time and places for study. Numerous teachers resorted to “crisis teaching” characterized by

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an emphasis on work with low cognitive demand (Schaffhauser, 2020), only to find that without the captive audience and disciplinary structures of face-to-face schooling, many of their students chose not to engage in online instruction at all. These challenges left educators wondering how to “attract” students in the distance learning environment. Still other educators struggled with learning about available tools for maintaining solid principles of responsive teaching, classroom management, and relationship-building in a distance learning environment, as well as how to use them. As one of my K-12 classroom colleagues stated with exasperation, “We are all new teachers now.”

Rightly, much has been made about the disruptive influence the Covid-19 pandemic wreaked on teachers and students, and teaching and learning (Goldstein, 2020; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). I propose, however, that there is a silver lining in this black cloud—that this moment of disruption is a catalyst for change in teacher education. Teaching professionals and those who support them can seize this opportunity to re-examine our approach to teaching and how we prepare and support teachers (Richmond et al., 2020). One area that shows tremendous promise for developing teacher practice is mentoring.

Early service mentoring plays an instrumental role in teacher preparation. There are a variety of pathways into teaching, but one constant is the pairing of a novice teacher with an experienced mentor (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). This is for good reason—research indicates that fieldwork mentors exert a greater influence on the future teaching practice of novices than any other aspect of their teacher preparation program experience (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; He, 2009; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Correspondingly, new California induction and teacher education program standards call for more rigorous criteria for mentor selection, including the use of cognitive coaching and co-teaching (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2017). The use of cognitive coaching and co-teaching encourages a transfer of agency from the mentor to the novice to achieve a more democratic relationship. In doing so, the mentor’s role shifts from being an expert consultant (a dispenser of advice) to a coach, (a mediator of thinking) (Costa & Garmson, 2016).

But, enacting the change from expert to coach is deceptively complex. During my twelve years as a high school science teacher, one of the most challenging professional experiences I had was serving as a mentor teacher. Absent any guidance on how to “be” a mentor, I cobbled together an approach that was an amalgamation of how I was mentored, how I worked with my biology learners, and what seemed appropriate. The sense of responsibility I felt for both for my mentee’s development

and that of my students was, at times, enormous, particularly when their needs were in tension. I vividly recall watching my mentee floundering to find a science analogy that resonated with the students or struggling with lab group compositions that were not functioning as they envisioned. Not wanting to undermine my mentee and deprive them of the opportunity to make in-the-moment adjustments, I watched from the stockroom doorway, trying to project a sense of calm. Meanwhile, my students were shooting me looks that conveyed their frustration with my mentee for creating a disordered learning environment and with me for failing to intervene. It was as if I was navigating the narrow waters between Scylla and Charybdis, choosing between the immediate learning needs of my students and the needs of my mentee and their future students.

Though at times frustrating, serving as a mentor also provided opportunities to rigorously interrogate our practice together. Working with my mentee to debrief both successes and challenges clarified my thinking about my own core teaching principles. These learning moments were most acute for both my mentee and me when we truly were just having conversations about teaching. In these moments we were peers problematizing our work rather than an expert/novice pair in which I imparted classroom wisdom. Unfortunately, these episodes were largely unintentional and therefore sporadic. I think back now and regret the countless missed opportunities for growth because I was too intent on indoctrinating my mentee into my way of teaching. No one was harmed in our interactions, but the partnerships did not live up to their learning potential for either of us.

My struggles to strike the right balance between structure and autonomy with my mentees were not unique. Attempts to democratize the relationship between experts and learners are not new (Freire, 2005; Schön, 1987). But despite the call to shift to coaching and co-teaching, many mentors retain significant amounts of authority in their relationships with their mentees under the cloak of “collaboration,” (Hargreaves & Skelton, 2012) particularly among mixed race or gender dyads (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Moreover, some mentors are tasked with an evaluation role which can compromise their ability to build trust with their mentee (Costa & Garmston, 2016).

In my work with mentor teachers over the past decade, I regularly encounter resistance to efforts to shift more authority for classroom decision-making to mentees. In particular, mentor teacher resistance involves concerns about: disrupting flow and risking their students’ learning; maintaining their ability to provide expert guidance; and helping mentees achieve teaching competencies in a specified timeframe. Quite often teacher candidates return to my methods class to discuss

a lesson they designed collaboratively within our course to report that their mentor would not allow them to teach the lesson. Moreover, in cases in which my teacher candidates attempt to involve their mentor in co-design, their suggestions are frequently dismissed. “They said it won’t work,” “they’ve always done it this way,” or “we don’t have time for that,” are common justifications reported during our debriefs. This opposition is not surprising—if an innovation is not viewed as practical, teachers tend to resist it (Janssen, Westbroek, & Doyle, 2013). As a former mentor teacher myself, I empathize. Why “fix” a lesson that is not broken by investing in the designing and refining a new method of instruction that risks a disruption in student learning?

I observe similar patterns of resistance among the induction mentors I work with and their mentees. Coaching conversations frequently start with open questions such as “how do you feel that lesson went?” and “what do you want to focus on?” but frequently devolve into a “guess what I’m thinking game” in which the mentee must divine what direction the expert thinks is best based on their experience. One mentor I worked with explained that her goal is to “trick” the mentee into thinking her solution is actually the mentee’s idea—a nod to promote mentee autonomy, but in appearance only. These types of strategies are not only duplicitous, they run counter to the spirit of coaching models that aim to promote mentee agency and self-reflection and can have deleterious effects on learning—adult learners desire an authentic voice in decision-making but resist mightily when they sense they are being manipulated (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The shifting of agency over one’s learning in teacher education standards is echoed in policy documents calling for the shifting of agency to K-12 students over their learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Ironically, the forms of instruction that novices propose that seem to get the most pushback from their mentors are those that require the classroom teacher to release more control to the students (not the teacher candidate) over their learning. As a result, mentors’ resistance to shifting of autonomy to both their mentee and their classroom students stifles the agency and creativity of both.

And yet I often understand mentors’ concerns with our teacher candidates’ proposed approaches. The mentors I work with have refined their craft over many years, with many students. I am also aware, however, that *telling* someone that something will not work is not the same as *learning* something will not work through experience. Mistakes are highly educative—and here I am talking about recoverable mistakes that do not do lasting damage to students. If one is not willing to take risks one is unlikely to grow in practice. Mentoring a novice is a matter

of balancing risk with reward, small failures with small innovations. Hargreaves and Fullan (2010) note:

The old model of mentoring, where experts who are certain about their craft can pass on its principles to eager novices, no longer applies...If the school assumes the mentor always knows best, even about teaching strategies, innovative new teachers might quickly experience the mentor relationship as an oppressive one. (p. 52)

Disquisition

One “rethink” the pandemic appears to have stimulated is a recognition of the skills and knowledge novices bring with them to classrooms. Though lacking in teaching experience, novices bring several assets to the fieldwork partnership with their mentors. They are typically digital natives, like their students, and familiar with the use of technology to connect with others and create content (Seward & Nguyen, 2019). Because they have yet to establish routines, they are less set in their ways and are more willing to experiment and take risks (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2010).

I witnessed these assets being accessed by mentors this past spring (sometimes in desperation), both in my work with my student teachers and with induction mentors. Without the concerns about meeting externally set timelines for student learning and the expectation of providing “expert” guidance on how to teach in an environment unfamiliar to both novices and mentors, novices were granted more freedom to innovate. For example, one of my teacher candidates had been trying to convince her mentor teacher to integrate Flipgrid as a formative assessment for months. She finally got her chance after the switch to distance learning in a lesson about extreme weather events. She said:

My mentor teacher was really worried about it. I finally got to try it and the students loved it. Students who had not turned in anything since distance learning started were recording videos.

As a digital native, this young educator recognized that her students were accustomed to expressing themselves in a short video format. The disruption of the pandemic permitted her the freedom to apply what she knew about her learners’ needs and advance her teaching practice. It also provided her mentor with a broader perspective of the capabilities of both their students and his student teacher.

Another of my teacher candidates reported similar student engagement during the pandemic when co-planning with his mentor teacher to integrate new interactive tools. They utilized Nearpod, an interactive slide deck delivery application that allows all of their students to view

videos, annotate readings, and share and respond to each other's ideas in real time: "We consistently had twenty students in class [out of thirty]. Pretty soon other teachers started asking us what we were doing because they would only have a few." This student and his mentor worked together to craft an engaging and challenging learning environment in which their learners had a voice and could interact with their peers and their teachers in ways that mirrored face-to-face classrooms.

Moments of successful innovation were also echoed by induction mentors working with novice teachers. One induction mentor shared with me her observation of one of her new math teachers who had been struggling all year with classroom management issues:

She became a rock star online. She made a parody news broadcast about collecting and graphing data then had students make their own. Kids you wouldn't normally see engaged produced amazing work.

Freed from the "standard" curriculum devised by her grade-level team without her input, this young educator engaged her learners in a meaningful mathematics idea.

Coaching conversations between mentors and their inductees also changed. Because both members of the dyad were essentially "new" to the distance learning context, the induction mentors no longer felt like they had all the answers. One explained, "I started asking more open questions, not questions to lead them to the solution I had but questions about their problem-solving process." The new teaching context redefined the roles of the novice and the expert and promoted what appeared to be a more egalitarian relationship. The result was innovative teaching that might not have been possible in the pre-Covid-19 context.

Not all innovations were equally productive, however. One of my teacher candidates spent several hours converting a genetics worksheet his mentor teacher had used for years to a drag and drop format using Google Slides to make it more "interactive." During our in-class analysis of the students' work, the teacher candidate expressed frustration that he could neither discern the reasoning behind students' responses nor could he even tell if the work was their own or plagiarized from a classmate. Though the drag and drop format was a clever work-around in the absence of pdf annotation software, his attempt to convert the assignment diminished the quality of information he and his mentor obtained about their students' thinking. Fortunately, he and his mentor subsequently identified a successful use for the drag and drop technique in a different genetics lesson.

The drastically different teaching context created by the pandemic demanded a willingness to try different teaching approaches. Many of

the successes revealed to me in my work with teachers over the past few months resulted from mentor/mentee pairs collaborating as peers to solve problems of practice. Seeing the development of more egalitarian relationships and instructional risk-taking among teachers was a bright spot in an otherwise gloomy spring semester.

Dispatch

Kuhn theorized that major advances in scientific thought were in response to disruptions to traditional ways of doing and thinking (2012). He defined a paradigm as a normal way of going about problem solving using familiar methods and routines. Normal practice is temporarily disrupted by crisis followed by a resolution to the crisis through a change in the normal way of thinking about a problem—a paradigm shift. Similarly, the current disruption in education has the potential to stimulate a rethinking of the way we apprentice new teachers into the profession. Kuhn’s “post-revolution normalization” in the teacher education context could be a flattening of the hierarchy between novice and expert and the building of a partnership that leverages the expertise each member brings to the work of constructing learning environments for children.

Co-teaching, co-planning, and cognitive coaching show promise in pre-service teacher education because they share an underlying assumption that both experts and novices have meaningful contributions to make (Costa & Garmson, 2016; Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, & Patterson, 2017). Yet thus far in my experience, the introduction of practices like co-teaching and cognitive coaching into teacher preparation programs have neither meaningfully nor comprehensively altered the expert-novice dynamic. This may be because co-teaching was originally introduced in pre-service teacher education to address the reluctance of K-12 schools to hand over teaching responsibilities to novices in an era of increased accountability (Bacharach & Heck, 2012). Similarly, mentoring programs that privilege meeting accreditation requirements rather than the learning and well-being of the participants tend to emphasize didactic and directive practices rather than collaborative dialogue and reciprocity (Heikkinen, Wilkinson, Aspfors, & Bristol, 2018). Difficulties related to finding adequate time to plan, build mutual respect, and foster shared responsibility within mentor-mentee dyads are documented in both the co-teaching and coaching literature (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Friend, 2008; Kinne, Ryan, & Faulkner, 2016). An additional challenge is the frenetic pace of daily instruction:

The pressure of work often encourages a focus on obtaining a ‘quick fix’—a rapid solution for a practical problem—rather than shedding

light on the underlying issues. While this may be an effective short-term measure in a hectic situation, there is a danger that one's professional development may eventually stagnate. (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, p. 48)

One potential change in the way schools of education and districts provide support for practices like co-teaching and cognitive coaching that may tip the balance could be an explicit focus on novice teachers' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Responsive teachers ascertain and build upon the funds of knowledge of their K-12 students (Gay, 2010; Robertston, Atkins, Levin, & Richards, 2016)—so induction faculty might intentionally leverage the assets novice educators bring to their campuses through cognitive coaching's focus on building habits of mind. Rather than approaching the preparation of novices with a lens of fixing and filling them we could identify and build from their strengths as we would with our K-12 students. Many schools of education already encourage co-teaching and co-planning but providing a co-planning tool to explicitly support mentors and mentee dyads in identifying the strengths that each brings to the lesson as part of co-planning can enhance instructional decision-making.

The first "assignment" my student teacher candidates completed this semester was to have a conversation with their mentor teacher about each other's assets. Armed with this knowledge about each other, the dyads then discussed how they might best take advantage of their combined strengths to promote student learning. One teacher candidate shared that though he and his mentor teacher came from very different backgrounds, they shared an interest in technology. They planned to collaborate around that strength and explore new tools to help them check for their students' understanding during distance learning. Another teacher candidate was encouraged by her mentor to use her knowledge as a radiation tech to make real-world connections to the lesson for their students. Thus far, these types of collaborations have been invigorating for mentors and empowering for the student teachers. It is possible that these assets might have surfaced on their own but planning for an intentional and explicit conversation around them meant that these important insights about each other were not left to chance.

Kuhn wrote that most disruptions of normal practice are reasoned away to maintain existing norms. The result is that most opportunities for revolutionary change are lost. Educators can seize the opportunity presented by the current loosening of concerns about timelines, external accountability, and established routines, obstacles that hampered freer and deeper collaborations in the past, to better leverage our novice teachers' assets and innovate together. Programs of teacher education

should provide explicit tools to support co-planning and co-teaching and include tools to draw out the funds of knowledge each member brings to the teaching dyad. Program data collection should focus not just on the skills of teaching, but also account for how novices collaborate and innovate. To foster the building of trusting relationships, pre-service and early-service mentors' roles should be clearly defined as supportive and collaborative rather than evaluative. Though the pandemic has posed many challenges, the disruption of the norm could be beneficial for mentors, mentees, and students alike if it results in more engaging, egalitarian, and innovative partnerships. We cannot let this opportunity to change our teaching paradigm slip by. Our best response is to reflect, learn and grow together.

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