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Real-Time Support: Using eCoaching to Increase Preservice Teachers' Confidence to Teach

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ABSTRACT

The role of teacher education preparation programs is to equip preservice teachers (PSTs) with the knowledge and skills to support the development of all students. To do this, university faculty must establish and monitor PSTs' progress toward quality standards for teaching. *eCoaching* is a professional learning strategy that provides real-time feedback to PSTs during instruction. In this article, the authors present an overview of *eCoaching* logistics, a description of *eCoaching* in action, and perceived impact of *eCoaching* on PSTs.

Keywords: *eCoaching, media literacy, teacher education, professional learning*

As media progress and their uses change, the definition of media literacy still includes the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, communicate, and act using a variety of media forms (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992; National Association for Media Literacy Education [NAMLE], 2018). Media literacy helps students develop and apply critical thinking skills (e.g., analyzing, evaluating, and creating), and it can be used to help preservice teachers (PSTs) develop pedagogical excellence and technological proficiency (Domine, 2011). Although researchers recognize the critical need for media literacy in education, the definition of media literacy continues to evolve, and the need for full integration of media literacy education persists as societal needs change (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Meehan, Ray, Walker, Wells, & Schwarz, 2015).

The role of teacher education preparation programs is to equip PSTs with the knowledge and skills they need to become effective educators (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2018), which is done through intentional coursework and clinical field experiences. Since media literacy permeates content and is not included as a specific strand in current curricula, university faculty and PSTs may not realize how the development of media literacy skills can help students critically engage with and progress towards mastery of their content learning objectives. With many programs offering specialized courses in media literacy as a separate class from content area methods classes, that perception

may continue to spread among PSTs and teacher educators. *eCoaching* is one professional learning strategy that can be used to support PSTs' media literacy development and ability to infuse it into their future classroom practices. In this article, we describe *eCoaching* and how it can be used as a tool for increasing confidence to teach, a sense of independence, and as an avenue for supporting media literacy development and integration.

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR *eCOACHING*?

eCoaching can be defined as “a relationship in which one or more persons’ effective teaching skills are intentionally and potentially enhanced through online or electronic interactions with another person” (Rock et al., 2014, p. 162). An *eCoach* is someone (e.g., university supervisor, university faculty, mentor teacher, administrator) who provides feedback to another person through the use of technology or digital tools. When used, *eCoaching* blurs the traditional roles in teacher education (i.e., teacher, PST, university supervisor), which in turn facilitates a shared experience between the PST and the university supervisor (Zeichner, 2010). As a result, each individual becomes an equal participant in the learning process by fluctuation among the stages within a Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model. Not only is *eCoaching* a means of communication via the use of digital tools, but university faculty can use *eCoaching* as a vehicle for helping PSTs develop and improve their own media literacy skills, pedagogical practices, and content area knowledge.

There are multiple types of *eCoaching* models in which technology is used to observe lessons and provide feedback and support. Some *eCoaching* models utilize technology to record lessons first and then provide virtual feedback after the lesson has been taught (Bullock & Ferrier-Kerr, 2014). However, the *eCoaching* model described in this article uses technology to provide feedback and support during the lesson in a real-time manner. To make it feasible to provide feedback during a lesson, the PST and *eCoach* need to be able to communicate in a way that allows the *eCoach* to 1) see the majority of the classroom, 2) hear the PST instructing students, and 3) speak to the PST so he/she can hear the *eCoach*'s feedback while teaching.

To engage in *eCoaching*, technology such as a laptop, a bluetooth earbud, video conferencing software, and a web camera can be utilized to establish and maintain communication between the PST and *eCoach* during the lesson (Figure 1). Video conferencing accounts such as Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>), Google Hangouts (<https://hangouts.google.com>), or Skype (<https://skype.com>) can be used for virtual communication. Additionally, a bluetooth earbud enables the PST to hear the *eCoach*'s feedback without distracting the PK-12 students. Finally, a wide-angle web camera can be used to provide the *eCoach* with a better view of the majority of the classroom. Having a wider view of the classroom enhances the *eCoach*'s ability to fully integrate into the lesson as a virtual co-teacher / supporter.

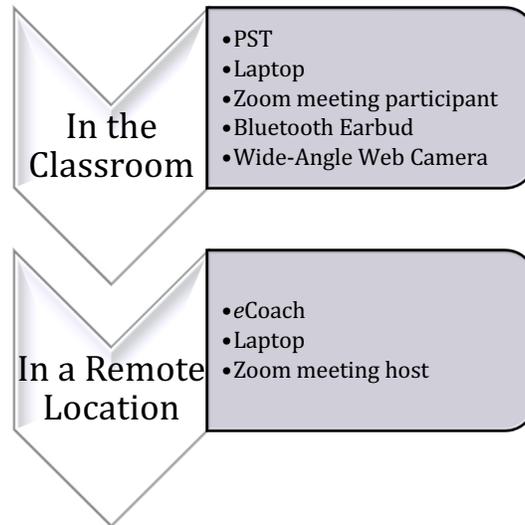


Figure 1. eCoaching materials.

During the eCoaching session, the eCoach is fully vested in problem-solving and instructional decision-making. Since PSTs receive feedback immediately, they do not have to wait to implement the eCoach’s feedback, and they can see the impact it has on student learning. Three types of feedback are used to support the PST’s professional learning during the eCoaching session: encouraging, corrective/instructive, and questioning (see Figure 2).

It is important to provide feedback to the PSTs that is both supportive and instructive. By using encouraging feedback, such as “Nice job asking ‘Why?’ to deepen their thinking”, the eCoach is providing specific praise that will increase the likelihood the PST will want to replicate the noted teaching behavior. Research suggests providing encouraging feedback four times more than all of the other types of feedback combined (Rock et al., 2014).

On the other hand, providing corrective/instructive feedback in real-time allows the PST to not only pinpoint an opportunity for improvement but to also see the impact the change in teaching behavior has on the PST’s effectiveness. It can be difficult to recreate a scenario during a traditional post-observation conference in order to explain why the PST should have or could have done something differently; however, by providing corrective/instructive feedback in the moment, the PST can apply the feedback to the current situation and experience the results of the change immediately.

The last type of feedback to use during instruction is questioning. This type of feedback is often used when the eCoach wants to remind the PST of an instructional practice that he/she already knows. Questioning feedback is rhetorical in nature, not meant to be answered but intended to spark an idea or remind the PST of prior knowledge related to instructional practices.

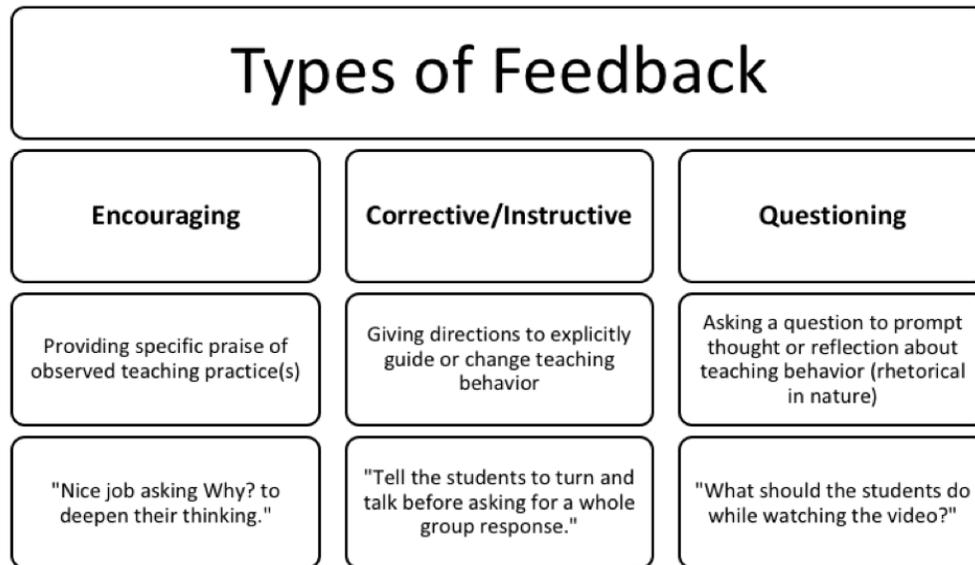


Figure 2. Types of feedback to use during eCoaching (Bellows, Cheek, & Blanton, 2019).

eCOACHING IN ACTION

In order to demonstrate how eCoaching can be used to support a PST's development, we present a case of Ms. Brooks (cooperating teacher; high school social studies), Diana (PST; pseudonym), and the eCoach (first author; university faculty) as an example of eCoaching in action. The eCoaching session took place during Diana's field experience in a local high school social studies classroom. Ms. Brooks observed the eCoaching session taking place from the eCoach's location across the hall. Through this case we contextualize eCoaching logistics and discuss ways in which eCoaching can be used to support a PST's growth and development during early field experience.

Preparation and Practice

First, Diana and the eCoach engaged in a practice session during one of her university methods course class sessions. Diana wanted to receive eCoaching to simulate what she would experience when she later taught a lesson to high schoolers. To practice, Diana engaged in microteaching as part of the requirements in her social studies methods course. She planned and taught a lesson to a small group of her peers. After the practice session, Diana debriefed her experience with the eCoach and her university professor (third author). They discussed initial reactions, audio issues, and feedback timing in preparation for the eCoaching session in the high school classroom later on.

Set-up and Implementation

Now that Diana knew what to expect, she indicated that she was ready to try it during her field experience teaching. Before the class began, Diana connected a web camera to the laptop and positioned it in a corner of the classroom that would

provide the *eCoach* with the best view of the lesson. The wide-angle web camera allowed the *eCoach* to view more of the room than a standard web camera or the integrated camera in most laptops can provide. Diana also wore a bluetooth earbud that had been paired with the laptop's audio. She wore a bluetooth earbud so she could hear the *eCoach*'s feedback during the lesson without disturbing students. The bluetooth earbud also served as a microphone so the *eCoach* could hear Diana's voice clearly. From a classroom across the hall, the *eCoach* initiated a Zoom video conference session with Diana and used her laptop's microphone to talk to Diana during the lesson. The *eCoach* also muted her side of the Zoom video footage so students could only see her profile picture on Diana's laptop instead of the *eCoach*'s live feed. By muting her side of the video, the *eCoach* reduced potential distractions for the students.

The *eCoaching* Session

For the *eCoaching* session, Diana planned a lesson about the New Deal during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency. She planned this lesson with guidance and feedback from Ms. Brooks and her university professor. Her lesson included instructional strategies such as interactive lecture, small group work, and student-led discussion. She also created curiosity about the topic by engaging the students in a game that allowed them to think critically while moving about the room. Following the game, Diana provided background information using interactive lecture as her primary instructional strategy and ended the lesson with small group research and presentations.

It is important to note that *eCoaching* can occur during any type of instruction including teacher-led whole group discussions/lectures, small group collaborative assignments, and even during one-on-one conferencing. During the lesson, the *eCoach* provided encouraging and instructive/corrective to Diana while she was teaching. Feedback focused on classroom management and instructional strategies. When Diana used a particular instructional strategy and she received praise specific to the use of that strategy, she quickly reflected on the *eCoach*'s comment, and her internal dialogue prompted her to want to continue using this strategy. When the *eCoach* provided instructive feedback, Diana either used it right away or waited until a logical time during the lesson to give it a try. Sometimes Diana said or did exactly what the *eCoach* suggested, and other times she implemented the feedback by making it her own and modifying it slightly to fit her teaching style. The *eCoaching* session was ninety minutes in length, corresponding to the time allotted for the fourth period class schedule.

Debriefing the *eCoaching* Session

After the *eCoaching* session, Diana, Ms. Brooks, the university professor, and the *eCoach* debriefed the experience to learn more about their perceptions of *eCoaching* as a professional learning strategy for PSTs. Ms. Brooks noted that the *eCoach* was engaged in the lesson in a co-teacher role via the use of bluetooth and video conferencing technology. By using technology to communicate with Diana, the *eCoach* was able to guide the PST and gradually give her more teaching responsibility while also providing highly individualized feedback and support.

Diana mentioned that it was not awkward after the first few minutes and she said the feedback she received during the *eCoaching* session was helpful, supportive, and encouraging.

DISCUSSION

Through the use of *eCoaching*, the integral support that is provided during initial teaching episodes facilitates PSTs' knowledge acquisition and transfer into classroom practice. Thus, *eCoaching* serves as a media literacy tool that university supervisors can use to help PSTs develop and apply critical thinking skills. Whether it is helping PSTs facilitate class discussions about propaganda techniques used during the New Deal Era or supporting the PST while he/she learns to model critical consumption of all media, *eCoaching* provides added scaffolding that can help PSTs transfer their knowledge and skills. Gretter and Yadav (2018) suggest that PSTs need university educators to model and teach media and information literacy to best prepare future teachers to integrate it into their instruction. *eCoaching* could be a solution for this perceived deficit in our teacher education programs by taking advantage of technology that allows us to guide their critical thinking and pedagogical practices during early field experiences.

In addition to improving instructional practices, initial findings from ongoing qualitative research indicate *eCoaching* also increases PSTs' confidence to teach (Bellows et al., 2019). While receiving virtual support from the *eCoach* located outside of the classroom (e.g., across the hall, in another building, in another town), the PST has the opportunity to be "alone" in the classroom and experience what it feels like to be responsible for student learning while also receiving feedback and support from an experienced teacher. This "supported virtual independence" has been noted to have a positive impact on teaching confidence (Bellows et al., 2019).

***eCoaching* within the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model**

Throughout early field experiences prior to student teaching, university faculty in partnership with local mentor teachers have provided varying levels of scaffolding to PSTs as they improve their skills. As a goal of teacher education programs, student teaching is a time when PSTs should progress towards feeling confident to plan and deliver instruction independently. The GRR model is often used as a way to increase student responsibility for learning while allowing the instructor to adjust levels of support based on a PST's needs.

The GRR model was coined in the early 1980s and is still relevant to educational practices today (Cimino, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). There are four steps in the GRR instructional model: focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning. The model suggests that students learn best when given the opportunity to interact with each other and when cognitive responsibility for learning is gradually shifted from the teacher to the student. Though initially used as a model for literacy instruction, this progression is used in many instructional settings including teacher education programs, especially during the field experience.

*e*Coaching blurs the lines between the guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning steps found within the GRR model (Figure 3). Fluctuating during the lesson between providing feedback (guided instruction), collaborative problem-solving (collaborative learning), and independent lesson facilitation (independent learning), *e*Coaching is a unique strategy for supporting PSTs through the GRR model as part of media literacy and teacher education programs.

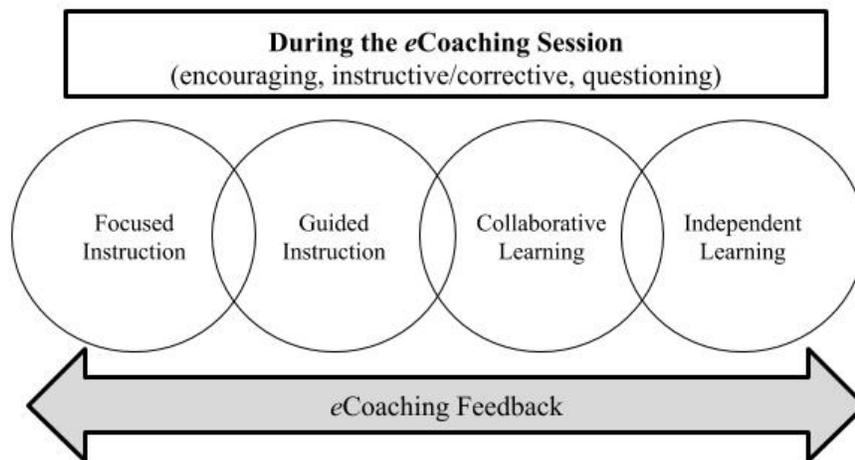


Figure 3. The gradual release of responsibility model through *e*Coaching.

This GRR model gave Diana increased support and feedback while also increasing her sense of independence. The fluid nature of *e*Coaching and the ways in which the *e*Coach can move seamlessly between the GRR stages of instruction allowed the *e*Coaching session to be personalized for the PST and her unique needs. To further support Gretter and Yadav’s (2018) conclusions, we suggest that *e*Coaching could be an effective way to increase PSTs’ confidence to teach media literacy in their future classrooms.

Perceptions of *e*Coaching as a Professional Learning Strategy

Diana communicated positive perceptions of *e*Coaching as a professional learning strategy. After the practice session, she reported that she thought wearing a bluetooth and getting feedback while teaching would be awkward but realized it was helpful instead. She noted that it was “weird” initially but when the *e*Coach started talking she quickly became used to it. She also said that it was helpful because she could “adjust on the spot as opposed to messing up and not knowing when I messed up.” As a result of *e*Coaching, Diana felt more supported through immediate feedback.

Specifically, during a coaching session, Diana was unsure how to use questioning to facilitate critical thinking about a topic. At times during the lesson, she struggled to lead students to support their ideas with specific reasons. The *e*Coach provided brief suggestions to her via bluetooth so Diana could lead the discussion using questions that fostered deeper thinking. For example, the *e*Coach

suggested, “Ask him to tell you why,” to help the PST engage the student in deeper thinking. By guiding Diana to ask more “why” questions, she learned how to probe students to consider evidence and take a stand. By the end of the lesson, Diana was initiating “why” questions on her own without prompting. At this point in the lesson, the *eCoach* was providing encouraging feedback such as “Nice job asking why.”

Diana also said that the support she received during the sessions via bluetooth made her feel more confident in her ability to teach. She said that if she felt unsure, she knew she had someone there to help her. Paradoxically, Diana felt a strong feeling of immediate support while at the same time feeling completely independent for the first time, given this was the first opportunity Diana had to physically be in the classroom with only her students. She was without the physical presence of her mentor yet reassuringly connected to her. Both Diana and Ms. Brooks reported that they felt the *eCoaching* model was a better way to prepare PSTs for student teaching.

Conclusion

We propose *eCoaching* as a professional learning strategy that can be used during early field experiences to build confidence and increase independence as they learn to teach their content and facilitate critical thinking and media literacy skills in their own classrooms. The nature of *eCoaching* is fluid, and it fuses well with a GRR model. As mentor teachers gradually release responsibilities of planning and teaching during their field experiences, we argue that PST’s perceived independence might be greater when using *eCoaching* than it would be otherwise.

This “supported virtual independence” led to increased confidence to teach in Diana’s case. We attribute that not only to the fluid nature of GRR, but also because the PST received immediate feedback, including specific praise, while she was teaching. In a sense, the *eCoach* helped increase Diana’s confidence by building the momentum for her to keep using particular strategies, which will aid in her development of effective teaching habits in the future.

In conclusion, we suggest a change to current field support practices to include *eCoaching*. Based on these findings, *eCoaching* can build confidence and independence prior to student teaching. Furthermore, through the unique way *eCoaching* integrates a fluid implementation of the gradual release of responsibility instructional model, *eCoaches* can also use this professional learning strategy as a means to help PSTs find ways to teach and model media literacy skills as an integrated part of their content learning objectives in a seamless and meaningful manner. We know that *eCoaching* increases confidence to teach (Bellows et al., 2019), and we agree that PSTs need to see instructional strategies modeled in order to gain knowledge and skills needed to teach effectively (Gretter & Yadav, 2018). Research indicates that confidence has a positive impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2012; Khan, 2011; Ashton, 1984). Why not set our PSTs up for success when they enter public school classrooms by using a professional learning tool at the university level that will ultimately improve PK-12 student outcomes?

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