The Changing Role of Educators Series:

The Blended Learning Coach

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About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual University*® (*MVU*®) to establish a center for online learning research and innovation, and through this center, directed *MVU* to work on a variety of projects. The center, known formally as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*™ (*MVLRI*™), is a natural extension of the work of *MVU*. Established in 1998, *MVU*'s mission is to advance K-12 education through digital learning, research, innovation, policy and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of *MVLRI* are:

- Research – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high-quality, high impact research;
- Policy – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

MVU dedicates a small number of staff members to *MVLRI* projects as well as augments its capacity through a Fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside *MVU* staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

Executive Summary

This study, the first in a series examining the shifts in the roles and responsibilities of K-12 educators as a result of evolving instructional models, focuses on the relatively novel role of the blended learning coach. The researchers sought to understand more fully the driving motivations, philosophies, and general thought processes at play when blended learning coaches work with K-12 educators in Michigan to help bring about changes in K-12 instruction through the promotion of blending online and face-to-face instruction. The researchers observed five themes that encapsulate the work of the blended learning coaches who participated in this study. The coaches' work was characterized by:

A desire to **understand and meet the specific, contextual needs** of all of the educators with whom they work. Context influences the conversations that coaches have with educators and ultimately shapes specific instructional practices.

An **emphasis on sound instructional practice over technological tools**. Blended learning coaches are careful not to focus too heavily on the capabilities of tools and instead aim to help educators think of specific instructional goals that may be achieved with the help of technology.

A concerted effort to **help educators embrace a shift to student agency**. Blended learning, in the framework used by these coaches, relies on students having a level of control over their own learning, something which some educators may need some assistance in adapting to.

An **encouragement to change the learning environment**. This change can manifest itself in the physical design of the learning space itself, as well as via less tangible changes to the social or emotional aspects of a classroom, to encourage more exploratory and learner-driven activity.

A focus on **engendering collaboration between educators**. Allowing educators to connect with others to share ideas and grow together in their practice is an integral part of the coaches' role.

Introduction

This report is the first in a series of studies focused on the changing roles of educators as a result of the shift in instructional models in K-12 learning environments. The series examines various newly emergent positions and roles within the field of education and highlights how the individuals who fill those roles approach their work, including virtual learning mentors, specialized instructional coaches, and others. This report focuses on blended learning coaches. These educators, working for an outside organization, provide guidance to teachers, administrators, and other school- and district-level personnel about how to holistically and meaningfully customize face-to-face and online learning for K-12 students. Coaches work with schools in a variety of ways, sometimes holding singular professional development events for a specific group of staff members and other times setting periodic meetings with individual teachers. Using the [Clayton Christensen Institute's blended learning definition and framework](#), coaches promote the development and implementation of high-quality blended instruction through training, consultation, and individual coaching. This study examines a number of artifacts produced by blended learning coaches in the state of Michigan, including various correspondence, recordings of planning meetings, interviews, and focus groups, in order to gain an understanding of how blended learning coaches approach their work, what they envision for the future of education, and how they illustrate the philosophy and motivation behind their practice.

Research Methods

This study is grounded in heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic research "is a search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience ... Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience, not behaviour" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, pp. 40, 42). For the purposes of this study, the heuristic approach is centered on understanding how the blended learning coaches, a relatively new role in Michigan's K-12 school landscape, understand their role, experience their work, and make decisions when they are helping educators in the field (Moustakas, 1990). The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of blended learning coaches, their thought processes and decision-making procedures, and their intent and purpose in coaching teachers while they change their instructional practices. The researchers used phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 2009) to analyze artifacts and identify themes that are relative to the participants' experiences in their role as blended learning coaches. Three blended learning coaches participated in semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Two focus groups involving all three blended learning coaches were also convened and also lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The protocols for interviews and focus groups can be found in the appendix of this report. Other artifacts analyzed include personal communication between coaches and educators, recordings of blended learning coach team meetings, published blog posts and podcasts, and coaches' written reflections from meetings or presentations. Member checks were conducted with the participants when data

analysis was complete (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis of the data revealed five distinct themes at play in the thought process and decision-making of the blended learning coaches. The next section delves into those themes and supporting data.

Results

A total of five themes were identified from analyzing the data collected by the research team. The identification of these themes helps provide an understanding of how blended learning coaches experience their role. Each theme is listed below, followed by a description of the theme and supporting data.

- Understanding and Meeting Contextual Needs of Educators
- Emphasizing Sound Instructional Practice over Technological Tools
- Helping Educators Embrace a Shift to Student Agency
- Encouraging a Change in the Learning Environment
- Engendering Collaboration Between Educators

Understanding and Meeting Contextual Needs of Educators

The blended learning coaches interviewed for this study provide guidance to educators in various learning environments. For instance, the coaches work with schools large and small and with initiatives ranging from alternative high school education programs to elementary parochial classrooms. One of the first steps for the blended learning coaches when they are engaging educators, a school, or a district is to understand the context of the situation using a needs assessment survey. These surveys may be given before or after an initial conversation with representatives from a district; those given after that conversation may be slightly more tailored based upon that initial meeting. (Examples can be found here and here.) Most important to the coaches is that the needs stay at the forefront of their conversations with educators. To that end, it is important for the coaches to remain cognizant that they are on someone else's "turf" and that the educators with whom they work have deeply ingrained practices and relationships that may be altered in some way as a result of the intervention they are providing. One of the coaches relayed, "I'm respectful of the fact that these are their courses, their students and, ultimately, their careers. I want them to be able to utilize me in a way that meets their specific needs ... So keeping these things in mind, I start off just listening to what teachers tell me they need and try my best to help out." In initiating those conversations, the coaches begin with the simple goal of establishing a common understanding of what blended learning entails.

From there, teachers are encouraged to identify specific instructional goals that may become more attainable with the implementation or refinement of a blended learning approach. One coach remarked, "Our first step is always helping them feel like 'We want to get to know your situation.'" Another coach offered a theoretical perspective on how blended learning is driven by context: "Blended learning isn't a thing in itself. Blended learning inhabits whatever space that you go into." In other words, the specific instructional needs in each setting will dictate

how blended learning is implemented and what sort of blended instructional practice will take shape. In reflecting on an early training session, one coach noted that many attendees were experiencing a high level of stress around the idea of changing practice after so much planning had gone into a traditional unit of instruction; the coach thought that building lessons with educators from the beginning of the unit development process, when instructional goals are still being determined according to student needs, would be very beneficial.

Context can also include a number of initiatives or ideas that a district's curriculum department is currently implementing or exploring alongside but distinct from the blended learning initiatives. The coaches noted that it is very important to understand what those parallel initiatives are because they could include competency-based learning, personalized learning, or any other number of innovations. Understanding how those initiatives connect and integrate with the practice of blended learning is a focus of initial teacher-coach conversations since the design of contextual professional development requires incorporating those elements into the learner experience for the teachers. Coaches also relayed that it is important to understand the staff dynamics in a specific setting before developing professional development goals and strategies. One district's administrators may put full faith and confidence in their staff to implement change after limited intervention, while another district's leadership may prefer a more tightly controlled approach. These differences in views certainly influence how each of the coaches engage in conversation with districts about how best to affect change.

Emphasizing Sound Instructional Practice over Technological Tools

Another common refrain from the blended learning coaches had to do with the focus on technological tools. Educators may often characterize the work that they do as a push toward more tech-rich instruction or the streamlining of classroom practices using various educational technology tools. While these aspects are certainly touched upon in the conversations between the coaches and teachers or administrators, the tools are not the focus. One coach remarked, "We're not the tech department. We are much more on the side of teaching and learning, lesson architecture, and plugging in technology to enhance that architecture." The coaches recalled starting off conversations by asking the teachers what they would like to see change in their setting. The teachers would respond with "technology specific questions like, 'do you recommend using Moodle, Google Classroom, or another LMS?' or statements like, 'I'd like to flip my classroom this year and also have my students engage with more interactive learning activities online.'" This prompted the coaches to start differently, that is, by having the teachers simply identify an instructional goal they would like to achieve and then working with them to design the learning experiences that would provide the best chances of meeting that goal. As one coach put it, "Start with the 'why,' not with the tools or the parts." Another coach added the following:

> I began to narrow my questioning a little bit more by starting with, "What do you expect students to learn in this lesson?" and having them write an outline of the course with the learning objectives as a guide. With the outline in place, we work through fleshing

out what teaching and learning should look like. Content informs pedagogical need, which in turn informs which environment, the online or face-to-face, best serves each component of a lesson. Asking teachers to think about the interplay of content, pedagogy, and technology rather than tech integration as an afterthought to lesson design.

<div align="right">Coach, personal communication, spring 2016</div>

Their first step in keeping instruction the central focus of design is to ask educators to consider a specific single unit or lesson that is currently part of their curriculum. Sometimes coaches even ask teachers to focus on a lesson that they feel is not going particularly well in the classroom. From there, the teachers are prompted to identify ways to enhance that lesson through the use of a blended learning approach. This can again lead to the necessity of distinguishing between true blended learning and tech-rich instruction. Teachers often ask coaches, "Is what I'm doing blended?" Examples like recording lectures or posting classroom handouts to a class website are sometimes cited as practices that may get confused with blended learning. Revisiting with teachers that shared understanding of the blended learning definition, borrowed from the Clayton Christen Institute, helps teachers look at their practices through a specific lens instead of getting distracted simply by the use of technology.

The coaches relayed that sometimes an early adopter of educational technology tools, someone who "adopts" a technology immediately after it becomes available, may come to a professional development session with hopes that the entire focus will be new tools. In these cases, one coach expressed that "You have to kind of say 'OK, there might be a new tool but it might not work for what you want to do, so why don't you tell us your objectives or what you want students to do, and we can kind of talk about the actual learning behind it and not the bells and whistles.'" As one coach said:

> Blended learning isn't about throwing out what is working in your classroom, but stretching thinking and growing opportunities. It isn't about using the latest flashy tool or being told you have to blend your instruction because it is the latest fad. This change should be driven by a desire to push and expand learning, to better what works for some students … to give all students a voice and chances to collaborate.

<div align="right">Coach, personal communication, spring 2016</div>

In one piece of correspondence, the coach noted a key point the teacher made: "We need to move teaching into the business of idea building and out of process sharing. It can't be about the tools; it needs to be about the vision of the classroom."

> When dealing with technology, there is always going to be an element of excitement over something new. There's a temptation to run off to the next big thing to create exciting and fun learning experiences. As instructors, we can't let that excitement overtake the foundational learning experience for our students. Remember to stay focused on what is important. Let your content and instructional strategies drive the technology that you use, not the other way around. Don't chase excitement and temporary novelty, but stay focused on lasting and sustainable change.
>
> Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

Even the smallest initiatives should focus on intentional design. One coach stated that implementation

> goes beyond tech integration. It's the systems around the tech that matter. Those systems need to include how blended learning will address student needs. This is why we can see many versions and varieties of blended learning implementation in Michigan and across the country. Every school and every classroom has specific student needs that drive the implementation of blended learning.

Helping Educators Embrace a Shift to Student Agency

In their work with administrators and teachers across the state, the blended learning coaches emphasize the importance of teachers shifting control from themselves to their students, a key feature of blended learning, so that students can create their own learning environment and take control of their own learning. The coaches mention the need for "giving kids opportunities to try things again and again," "differentiating for learning groups," "personalizing student learning," "building lessons that embrace problem solving over task completion," "giving students more autonomy to drive their learning at different speeds and direction," "recognizing that every student builds toward learning targets in sequencing unique to them," and "insisting on content mastery, not hoop jumping." One coach explains that this shift to student agency and personalized learning:

> requires understanding the nuances in how each student learns. To build this understanding, we must intentionally design aspects of lessons that inform us how students are doing. More than right or wrong answers, teachers need to be informed about how students are thinking. Understanding how students are thinking is the first step. Acting on it is the next. The more conversation you can have with your students about their learning, the more you'll be able to provide them with insights and point them to specific resources that will benefit their specific needs.
>
> Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

> As content experts we often have the urge to have students discover everything we know. If we lead student thinking too much, it instills a "seek and destroy" mentality to find the "right answers" when really we want to put them in a space for discovery. Giving students more creative input can result in them demonstrating their learning in ways that we could have never predicted.
>
> Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

Another key aspect that the blended learning coaches emphasize is the need for teachers to build literacy skills in their students – digital literacy specifically – as digital literacy is required for fully realized student agency. One coach urges that "it is really irresponsible of teachers to assume that experienced technology users equate to advanced information users." Another coach continued, "When one is [technologically] fluent, or worse assumes someone else is fluent, it makes it easy to ignore the need to intentionally teach literacy skills ... These skills need modeling and they need to be developed within the context of learning. It must permeate the very core of teaching and learning, beyond being a flashy appendage." These skills are necessary as the teacher scaffolds the learning space that will encourage and empower learners to take control of their learning.

In the same vein of ceding some control to students is the idea of helping the educator embrace their role as facilitators of student learning. The blended learning coaches explain to teachers that this shift "provides teachers more time to interact with students," "moves teachers away from the need to give kids what they need to know," "gives teachers time to teach students how to learn, model what they need to do, how to work in groups, etc.," as well as "provides teachers more time to provide immediate feedback during real-time learning" and "talk *with* the kids rather than *at* the kids." Additional correspondence from teachers who have worked with the blended learning coaches explain their shift in roles:

- "Teacher becomes more of a facilitator – 'it's okay to say I don't know!'"
- "The role of the teacher is to become the opportunity creator."
- "I help them [students] learn, and I give them all of the tools. I focus on the three Fs – I give them the framework for what they need; I give them the focus in what lessons they should be focusing on; and I give them the feedback."
- "Your instructor should be there to guide you and not do everything for you."

Additionally, the blended learning coaches encourage teachers and administrators to model for students that it's okay to fail, "as it is an important step in the learning process ... it's okay to be uncomfortable, it's okay to take risks." They set the stage for students to "think outside the box," to try things out then "fix it and see what works better." One coach notes that

blended learning doesn't happen overnight and yes, there will be times when things go off track – difficulties arise and technology fails. But there will also be times when the pieces fall into place and the "ah ha" moments materialize, when students blow all your expectations away because they have been given an opportunity to go beyond what is "good" and find their own voice, because they were given a choice in their learning. All because you as an educator made a change.

Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

Encouraging a Change in the Learning Environment

Hand-in-hand with the change in the role for both learners and teachers is the change in the learning environment itself, and the blended learning coaches say that is one of those topics that comes up often.

The blended classroom does not look like the traditional classroom. You won't see students sitting quietly in rows, listening to a teacher lecturing from the front. You are likely to see students working individually or in small groups. There will be talking. Maybe even arguing. You might see students quietly staring at a computer screen with headphones on. The teacher will likely be roaming around the room rather than teaching in the front. You may not even be able to discern where the front of the room is. It would be easy to look at a blended classroom and think that there's no way learning could be happening in the midst of the apparent chaos. Don't trust your eyes with that initial observation. Look closer, ask questions, and you will see where learning is taking place.

Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

The coaches work with teachers and administrators to think about how instructional goals might shape the look and feel of a learning space. One of the coaches emphasizes that the "physical design of places shape[s] the behavior of the people that occupy them. This in turn makes me think of the goals of blended learning and how traditional classroom designs seem to be incongruent with them." Building on the idea of shifting autonomy to the students, students will also need the autonomy to "know how to seek out surroundings that meet those needs." The blended learning coaches talk about breaking apart lesson components and deciding intentionally which activities would "support the greatest learning space – face-to-face or online?" They help their teachers think through how to design blended learning environments where the face-to-face and online environments are "well integrated with one another as opposed to feeling like disconnected parts." They also think in terms of active learning – "encouraging teachers to go beyond students sitting in front of computers," "extending the learning environment beyond the physical classroom space," "encouraging students to learn by doing," and "networking students beyond the classroom."

In addition to physical environment changes, the social, emotional, and psychological spaces shift as well. One coach recalls once being a blended teacher and encouraging the "importance of empathy. Quietly focused students need to be able to work alongside students who crave collaboration. I had the difficult task of praising the excitement and energy of collaborative groups while simultaneously reminding them that they needed to moderate their talking volume to avoid disturbing other people." He reminds us that

> ... our traditional one-size-fits-all school model has trained us all to believe that students should all be working in the same way, essentially creating a forced harmony. We need to evolve our expectations of what appropriate classroom behavior is. No longer can we expect everyone to behave alike; we have to respect differences and communicate our work atmosphere needs in constructive ways.
>
> Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

These spaces can also be conducive for thinking and reflection, where learners can "actively engage their thinking about a problem or question" that is posed. To be intentional in the inclusion of reflective activities is important to transform the learning space. Additionally, there is a shift from a focus on grades to a focus on formative feedback and a shift from time limits to open learning based on mastery.

One of the coaches encourages creativity and flexibility when thinking through the design of learning spaces and getting the students and other stakeholders involved in that decision-making process. It is also key in keeping stakeholders informed of the changes that are happening as well because, as another blended learning coach mentioned, "It's quite likely that you will encounter doubters along the way." The same coach encourages new blended teachers to "Be prepared with examples, evidence, and anecdotes to share that show your success. You will probably need to be proactive in recording and sharing student work and documenting what you are doing." This environment change also needs to have support from the building-level administration, as was mentioned by one of the coaches: "Teachers are simply one piece of the puzzle as school leaders also need to encourage others to change their practice ... Administrators need to lead for change, creating the time and space for teachers to learn and experiment."

> Blended learning doesn't have to consist of sweeping change, but small supports like giving students the opportunity to ask questions or share ideas in an online space. Opening up options for sharing understanding using mediums they feel comfortable with, creating videos, or collaborating on a presentation with others outside the brick and mortar classroom are also entry points to blending learning. Small changes that support quality instruction and give students choice in their learning can have a big impact on student outcome.   Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

Engendering Collaboration Between Educators

One of the clear messages from the blended learning coaches is that blended learning is like "building the plane as you fly it" and that collaboration between educators is key in keeping up with how blended learning is changing from one moment to the next. The blended learning coaches use social media to make a concerted effort to connect with educators across the state to reflect on blended learning implementation and share insights. This effort manifests itself in an active community of educators engaging with one another in training events, online professional development classes, and active, ongoing conversations through email and Twitter.

One coach said that during professional development opportunities, teachers "talk about what's going on in their classrooms where they normally wouldn't have time or be able to talk with teachers from different districts. So they're making connections and they're exchanging emails and saying 'Oh this is great because we got a chance to learn what so-and-so is doing in their classroom.'" The coaches have encouraged the teachers they work with to build an active professional learning network. This has helped to form a culture of collaboration, where teachers share what they're doing and engage in conversations with educators to help push their thinking.

> Remember that you are not working in isolation. You are part of a large community of educators who have gone before you and are working alongside you. You can learn from their successes and also their failures. Take the time to seek out the advice of fellow teachers. Read blogs, explore Twitter, engage in conversations. Your blended learning family can support you, encourage you, and provide fresh ideas as you work toward always improving your practice.
>
>   Coach, personal communication, spring 2016

The coaches have also had to help stay at the forefront of the evolving definition of blended learning, both in theory and in practice, to help teachers and administrators steer clear of the "too big" vision of blended learning, which is essentially any integration of technology in the classroom. On the other hand, they try to keep teachers and administrators from thinking too

narrowly about the definition of blended learning – such as "cling[ing] to this narrow vision of online learning ... like flipped learning." The blended learning coaches continue to push the thinking of the educators with whom they work for deeper understanding at both the teacher level as well as the learner level. To keep up with the changes that are happening in the field, the coaches attend local conferences to continue to engage with their community of learners (teachers and administrators).

Summary, Implications & Future Research

This study was conducted to understand the experiences of blended learning coaches – to gain an understanding of their thought processes and motivations – as they fill newly emerging roles within the realm of K-12 education. The study revealed five distinct themes that represent the experiences of blended learning coaches when working with educators:

- Understanding and Meeting Specific Contextual Needs of Educators
- Emphasizing Sound Instructional Practice over Technological Tools
- Helping Educators Embrace a Shift to Student Agency
- Encouraging a Change in the Learning Environment
- Engendering Collaboration Between Educators

Insights gleaned from these blended learning coaches can be used to inform the practice of others filling similar roles within K-12 education, especially those who seek to promote shifts in instructional practice and provide customized, contextualized professional development and support to teachers. Additionally, since the blended learning coach role is relatively new, their practice can potentially serve as a model for new programs endeavoring to become involved in blended learning. Finally, the current study initiates a conversation around blended learning professional development that can in turn help this group of blended learning coaches identify gaps or areas for possible improvement in their coaching program.

Further research on this topic should focus on the experiences of teachers and administrators who work with blended learning coaches and more in-depth looks at observable changes in their instructional practice. Also of potential benefit would be an examination of how these themes, along with the philosophies and motivations that drive the blended learning coaches, change and evolve to reflect both updated practice in K-12 classroom settings and the prolonged and established relationships which the blended learning coaches are cultivating. Lastly, future installments in this series will examine other roles that have been newly created or have shifted to reflect the changing K-12 instructional landscape.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. How do you define your role as a blended learning coach?

2. What are the five most popular frequently asked questions from educators?

3. How do you answer their questions?

4. Share some examples of how you support teachers in their shift to blended learning.

Focus Group 1 Protocol

1. How do you encourage or stress the importance of change with the educators with whom you meet?

2. What comes easy in terms of changing practice in blended learning implementation? What do you observe/hear from educators with whom you work? What is easy for educators to change? What sorts of changes meet the least resistance in themselves as educators and within the system in which they work?

3. What challenges?

4. How does your messaging differ when talking about change with different groups of people (i.e., administrators vs. teachers)?

Focus Group 2 Protocol

1. How do you decide what is shared out on your social media and mass communication platforms (i.e., blog, podcasts, vodcasts, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)?

2. How do you build your community? What's important as you think through what to share out?

3. What are the current interactions within each of your platforms? What are your expectations for interactions? What kinds of things do you talk about on each of these platforms?

4. How would you compare your depth of interactions between your social media activities versus your face-to-face work?