**Addressing Challenges of the Common Core through**

**Technology and Literacy Coaching**

In an issue of *The New Yorker* from October 2011, surgeon Dr. Atul Gawande questioned: “Top athletes and singers have coaches. Should you?” Well, considering my athletic (much less my coordination) skills are sub-par, and singing will never be my strong suit, nonetheless I was intrigued with this Gawande’s proposal. At Saginaw Valley State University, we have formed a literacy coaching program that works closely with local K-12 teachers in order to address the challenges of the New Common Core standards, as well as forming relationships to bridge the communication gap that is often missing between K-12 and college teachers. Dr. Pat Cavanaugh and Dr. Helene Lusa have been running the literacy coaching program, which is currently in its third year (the new grant cycle just started at the beginning of October). This morning, I’d like to talk about a few things. First, I’ll go through some of the details about how exactly we see our literacy coaching program as being effective, how we’ve structured it, and what kind of relationship building activities we promote. Second, I’ll discuss our focus on multi- and interdisciplinary literacy needs in the K-12 classroom and how college instructors are an important voice in that conversation. Finally, I’d like to show you how we have designed a weeklong technology workshop in order to specifically address these conversations.

But let me go back to Gawande for a minute. In one of the typical clever New Yorker cartoons that’s scattered throughout the article, there’s an image of a surgeon “scrubbing in” for surgery. To his left is a drawing of what looks like a football coach, busily covering a chalkboard with “Xs” and “Os” indicating game plans. This dichotomy is perfect: why should we relegate the coaching staff to certain activities, like sports and music? Why not extend this practice into other fields, like literacy? How many times have we given “pep talks” to our students? How often do we support our colleagues with a teamwork mindset? The idea of coaching, while often implied, is all around us. What we’ve done at SVSU is made it a top priority. Now, of course, we are far from the first institution to initiate a coaching program. Oftentimes these coaching relationships fall under the guise of “mentoring”—but we wanted to steer clear from the “expert” v. “trainee” roles. We’re all teachers. We all do our jobs really well, and really creatively with limited sources. We didn’t want the idea of the “fancy” (uptight, know-it-all—whatever your favorite description might be) college professors waltzing into the K-12 system and saying “you’re doing it wrong.” At a programatic level we made sure that we would avoid this mindset—we ran from it. Instead, we took Gawande’s advice: “No matter how well trained people are, few can sustain their best performance on their own. That’s where coaching comes in.”

Let me describe a little more about our program. First, we are not an evaluative service. As a literacy coach, it is not my job to step into someone’s classroom and tell the teacher what’s going wrong—or even to give constructive criticism. Rather, we’re a support group—we cheerlead, we encourage, we’re an extra helping hand, and most importantly, we listen. Literacy coaching, from our perspective, should be a two way street—we bring ideas to each other, talk about failures and successes, and we talk about the needs of our students. Note that there’s no hierarchy here. When I first became a coach, I’ll admit I was quite hesitant because of my age. Not to toot my own horn (but, heck, why not) I’m still pretty young and have a lot of years to go in my career. I’ve only been teaching for 7 years, considerably less than the teachers I met with. I thought, “what could I teach them they don’t already know?” And that’s where our director, Pat Cavanaugh, stopped me and said, “you’re not teaching them anything. You’re right, they know a lot more about teaching than you do! We’re there to coach, not teach.”

At its most basic level, our coaching program works like this. We have about 60 K-12 teachers who participate in this program (some administrators, too, but I want to focus specifically on the teaching aspect). Additionally, there are approximately a dozen coaches from SVSU. The coaches and the teachers meet three times a year (often during a teacher’s prep period) and communicate via e-mail when we think of something interesting the other might like to know. We have monthly workshops—on Saturdays. At 8 am. And they’re well attended. Our group is committed to making the conversation work effectively. (Now, part of me still thinks the program is part magic because of how well it is working.) We talk about best practices in reading and writing across all the curriculums. For example, we’ve had science teachers present activities that encourage active reading and writing—anything from newspaper articles about scientific advancements all the way to creating narratives for picture books. We have binders full of –no, not women—but reading and writing strategies that we often apply to different activities. For example, one of my teachers (who teaches 8th grade social studies and history) uses actual historical documents from specific periods (like, the civil war). The teacher then asks the students to read these documents to gather information about the social life of the societies. The teacher guides them through some initial activities about how to draw conclusions from these (very different) looking pages and language. The students, who this teacher admits have a lot of difficultly comprehending information, find this activity rather exciting and most importantly apply these readings to other activities in the civil war unit. Comments like “so is that like X we read about” or “I read an article about that event—it had a different perspective” are not uncommon from the students. And wouldn’t we all love more of that (at any level)?!

It’s these reactions from our students that we strive for. We all know how to teach, and we’re good at—that’s why we’re here! But how can we help each other become even better? How can coaching each other, even those in very different disciplines, strengthen the educational journey from K-12 all the way into advanced college courses?

Our focus on “literacy” is not just reading and writing (in the English language arts sense), but we’re interested in using technology to encourage storytelling, creating texts, and communicating ideas across the curriculum. One of the challenges, of course, is the availability of technologies. The schools that participate in our grant (those in the Great Lakes Bay Region) vary greatly with technology accessibility—some schools provide MacBooks for each student while others share a computer lab on an irregular basis. Even the technology in the classrooms aren’t consistent (this is, of course, not news to those in education!). That being said, the commitment to using content area literacy techniques in the classroom and using technology is difficult. However, as a group we have created some ways to approach these situations. For the remainder of my presentation, I will discuss our weeklong technology seminar (held the week after school let out in June!) and the different preparation we made over the summer. That way, when September hit, we were ready to hit the ground running—whether we had the technology in our classrooms or we had to wait for a computer lab day.

I’ve made copies of our schedule, just so you get an idea of how we structured our time [Distribute copies]. I’ve also made copies of our literacy strategies for all of meetings between teachers and coaches just so you have more of an idea of what we’ve focused on when it comes to literacy strategies.

So, what would make teachers want to come to a weeklong seminar (all day! Five days!) right after the school year let out and were hoping to regain even the slightest bit of sanity? It was a common goal—to get a jumpstart on the next school year well in advance. Our goal during the week was not only to introduce and play with some of the technologies I’ll discuss in a minute, but we wanted to actually create and share an actionable lesson plan that could be adapted for all grade levels. As you can see on the schedule, it was action packed. The list of technologies we used that week included (ahem): Google Docs, Prezi, Excel, Blogger, Inspiration, Gliffy, Bubbl.us, Popplet, Read Write Think, Jing, Animoto, Glogster, Blabberize, Fakebook, and Toondo. Here’s really how the week went: on Monday, we were excited, we went slightly crazy by Wednesday, and by Friday we were slap-happy. I’m going to share with you some of the exciting tools we used and some of the really cool results.

**Animoto:** **What is it?:** Create stunning videos! Turn your photos, video clips, and music into stunning video masterpieces to share with everyone. Fast, free, and shockingly easy! (**Animoto:** [**http://animoto.com**](http://animoto.com/); **Animoto for Education:** [**http://animoto.com/education**](http://animoto.com/education))

**ToonDoo:** [**http://toondoo.com**](http://toondoo.com)  
**What is it?:** I think the best way to describe it is through a little joke. One of the samples I found was simply called “Electrons.” In the first panel was a drawing of two atoms, one saying “dude, I just lost an electron!” This is followed by the other atom asking, “are you sure?” And of course, the punch line, “yeah, I’m positive!”

* Easy to use – just a few clicks and drag ‘n drops
* Create 1, 2 or 3-panel comic strips (and edit!)
* Choose from a vast variety of characters, props and backgrounds categorized into specific galleries
* Upload images from your own computer or from anywhere else on the web Can be used with multiple languages
* Add finishing touches to your toons
* Embed your toons in blogs, websites or forums
* Share, mail, tag, recommend and bookmark your comic strips
* To make a short story long, you can also combine multiple toons into a toonbook

**Blabberize:** [**http://blabberize.com/**](http://blabberize.com/)  
Are you familiar with those funny cartoons you often see on late night shows? Where they’ll take a celebrity and make his/her jaw move? That’s Blabberize. It’s a pretty fun tool where you can make any photo or image into a talking video. Even better, you record your own voice. A lot of the samples are students doing reports on animals and talking about their habitats and other interesting information.   
**What is it?:** Make any photo a talking video!   
With “Fakebook,” there was a lot of hesitation about using this one. Many of the teachers and coaches weren’t really sold on the idea of “Facebook”—but we found some templates that allow students to create “Facebook” like pages for their units. This program is designed to look like Facebook, but for educational purposes only. It's not affiliated with any social media, and it stays within the classroom. Also, it's great for all subjects. You could make “fakebook” pages for any historical figure, scientific principle, math equation, literary character, whatever. It’s also neat because the students post “status updates”—which can be really helpful for learning backgrounds, concepts, and any other ideas you’d like them to focus on. One of the samples uses the artist Monet—and has a bunch of “images” he’s tagged in (these are, of course, his paintings).

***Fakebook:***<http://www.classtools.net/fb/home/page>  
***ReadWriteThink:***<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/games-tools/profile-publisher-a-30243.html>  
The only drawback with this program is that the profiles must be printed after they are completed. There's no way of sharing them online (unless we use Google Docs!)  
 I’m happy to talk more about some of these tools or even to elaborate on the projects some of the teachers designed. Thanks for letting my share some of our success stories—it has really been a fun year and we’re off and running on another one. Thanks!