



YOUR VOICE MAILBOX IS FULL — OF LEARNING

PRINCIPALS COLLABORATE THROUGH PHONE APP

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Do you ever laugh as you look at your schedules and wonder how you will fit this next vital meeting in an already time-challenged week? As educational

leaders, we have schedules full of responsibilities, meetings, and events. With all of those urgent demands, it can be a challenge to find the time to fuel one's passions and grow professionally.

It also becomes increasingly difficult as we move up the administrative hierarchy to find role-alike colleagues to connect with and learn from. Unlike teachers who have other teachers to network with throughout their school

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day, administrators do not always have direct colleagues in the building and may not have others to connect with in their district or region. As a result, educational leaders are often left to their own devices to identify opportunities for support and collaboration in the pursuit of professional growth.

Technology is helping education leaders overcome this isolation and connect with learning partners and communities. We and our collaborators have leveraged a mobile app that allows us to engage in book discussions either in real time or asynchronously so that we can give professional learning the time it deserves.

This structure provides many of the benefits of an in-person discussion group, such as building relationships and practicing reflection with other trusted professionals, with the added time flexibility for busy professionals.

Beyond meetings, the three of us — an assistant superintendent, innovative adult learning coordinator, and instructional coordinator in the Chicago suburbs — wanted to be part of a collaborative that would focus on sustained professional growth. Although we had long participated in consortiums with educators from various school districts in the Chicago suburbs, we often found ourselves at gatherings caught up in the minutiae of our jobs rather than focused on the richer adaptive growth experiences offered by the group, which Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002) have emphasized in *Leadership on the Line*.

Fortunately, we connected with

two principals at suburban Chicago high schools, Janice Schwarze and Ben Collins, who invited a group of other like-minded school leaders to start a leadership coaching cohort for school and district administrators.

This group met four times in person throughout the school year and matched participants into pairs who coached one another, focusing on personalized, job-embedded learning. Partners met on average three to six times a year, using a variety of methods, including phone calls, email, and technology to reflect on and grow their practice.

To build on the success of this work after the first year, the group embarked on a book study over the summer. Collaborating across districts provided connections to other school leaders with varied experience and roles. Instead of only being exposed to one district's vision, jargon, and setting, this book study broke through that isolation to cultivate meaningful connections for participants fostering professional and personal growth beyond one's district lens.

We knew it would be difficult to get together in person over the summer — it had been hard enough to coordinate schedules during the school year — so we brainstormed how to use technology to further our goals. Janice Schwarze had been a huge proponent of a mobile app called Voxer during the leadership coaching experience, and we knew many members of the group were using it successfully as a convenient way to connect with coaching partners.

Voxer is a free mobile app that allows users to quickly leave voice messages for another individual or group of individuals. The app notifies members when someone is leaving a message for them, and the user can either click in and listen to it live (as if using a walkie-talkie) or listen to it at a later time. This structure was a great fit for our goal of group book discussions and for the challenge of coordinating schedules.

A FLEXIBLE STRUCTURE FOR COLLABORATION

Voxer allowed us to hold a discussion at times that are convenient for each individual, yet still facilitate a conversation that builds on one another's ideas. In fact, several members of our group participate in the Voxer discussion in the car during their commute to or from work. The Voxer discussion resembles a live, in-person discussion about a book, even when members don't all participate at the same time.

For the first year, leaders of the group selected the books, choosing titles that would provide professional practice insights and elicit questions and discussion. Then the three of us, as facilitators, divided participants into three small discussion groups to keep communication manageable. Each of us led a group of five to six people in discussing a different book. We also selected dates for chapter discussions and managed communication with our group.

There were no set norms for Voxer

groups, except for confidentiality and expected professionalism of all involved, especially because there might be educational leaders from a variety of roles in one district serving in the same Voxer groups. It was imperative that people felt they could speak freely and candidly.

Book chapter discussions often began with the group’s facilitator sharing a quote or reaction to the chapter the group read for that week. The group would then break down the book by chapters and assign a chapter or two to discuss each week, and group members took the lead in facilitating one of those assigned chapters. Other members of the group would respond to that initial idea, add new ideas, or pose questions to the group related to the weekly assigned chapter(s).

One great advantage of Voxer is that participants don’t need to wait for an upcoming meeting to share an idea. As you read the book and something comes to mind, you can quickly grab your phone and share your idea or ask your question immediately.

Because this format uses asynchronous communication, one may not hear a group member reply to a question or ideas for several days. The participants therefore have to work at making sure the conversation still feels like a discussion by responding to and building on other’s ideas rather than simply just recording one’s own thoughts for others to listen to.

Sometimes life or work overtook a member’s schedule and he or she was unable to contribute. When this happened to many participants in an electronic book study, the facilitator would step in to continue the discussion and re-engage the group.

Another important feature about Voxer is that a message cannot be deleted unless you pay an additional fee for an upgrade on the app. When sending your thoughts to your group members via the app, it operates as a stream of consciousness, so you cannot go back, delete, and re-record. In this sense, it is very much like a real

conversation and requires members to use the same etiquette as in a conversation.

SELF-DIRECTED YET COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The Voxer book study is an opportunity for adult learners to engage in a self-directed yet collaborative learning experience. It is aligned with Malcolm Knowles’ (1977) principles of andragogy, or the art and science of adult learning.

Andragogy theory states that adults are most interested in learning when it has immediate relevance and impact in their work (Merriam, 2001), and in our book study, the readings and discussions are connected to our daily work as school leaders. It also follows the principles of self-direction and learner-centeredness, which are critical components in adult learning theory (Orey, 2012).

Reflection is an important part of this work. Knowles’ theory prescribes that participants evaluate their learning process (Knowles, 1977), and other adult learning research, like Donald Schon’s reflective practice theory, expects that practitioners “become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experiences” (Schon, 1987).

Throughout the book discussions, participants were reflective about their own practice and bias so they could determine areas of their own practice that were reinforced by the reading and other areas that they wanted to change or alter. And we, the facilitators, reflected and solicited feedback from participants for the purposes of learning and improving.

The first summer book study was successful enough that we did it again during a second summer with returning and new participants, and we used this feedback to modify its structure the next year. We plan to continue this book study format as long as we have participants.

As education innovator George Couros (2015) reminds us, “Innovation

is not reserved for the few; it is something we will all need to embrace if we are to move forward.” Educators need to not only embody this as they think of the use of technology in their classrooms and schools but also how they can grow as a professional. We urge all to take a risk and think how they can leverage the resources available to them to meet their own professional needs.

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