

Sonia Bodi  
North Park University

Bits and Bytes:  
Using Technology to Train Academic Librarians as Coaches

The prediction of numerous librarians retiring in the near future is beginning to come true. By our very nature, librarians are eager to share information and knowledge, and as many of us approach retirement we wonder what we'll do with all of the knowledge we have gained through spending many of our working years in a profession we have loved. When the then Chicago Library System announced they had received an IMLS grant to develop a training program, Teach\*Model\*Coach (T\*M\*C), for experienced librarians to learn to coach those relatively new to the profession, I enthusiastically applied. This opportunity to coach helped answer for me the question of what do I do with all I have learned as I approach retirement and beyond.

The application process was done entirely by email. The T\*M\*C website announced the coaching program and its purpose and invited librarians to apply. The website also gave the application requirements. Following these requirements, I sent my Coaching Program essay and resume, and received my acceptance into the program all by email. Prior to selection as coaches, we were each interviewed in person at the Chicago Library System office. When the coaches were all selected, we received by email everyone's name, place of work and position, phone number and email address. Through cyberspace, we were becoming a community. The coaches were from academic, public, special, and school libraries. I knew some, had heard the names of others, and a few were strangers to me, but I eagerly looked forward to meeting all of them at our first two-day training at the Union League Club in Chicago. Having become familiar with each other through the emailed list, we quickly became a community of librarians anticipating learning how to become effective coaches.

The T\*M\*C website was available to the coaches before and during the year of training. On the website were links to FAQ, General Tips on Using the TMC Forums, and General Help. We could post questions which were interesting to read before we ever met. However, I've been part of a number of virtual discussion groups and forums, and my experience has been that a lot of posting happens in the first few days or weeks when it's a new group, and then nothing more is added. Though this discussion group wasn't any different, it was another way of introducing us to each other.

Email was used to send announcements and reminders of events, and to share news of the group. One of the emails had the sad news of the death of one of our members and the death of a member's son. Sharing in these sorrows meant a lot to all of us. The Four Month Check-In was also sent by email and we responded by email. The Four Month Check-In was an opportunity for the coaches to reflect on the coaching tools we had been using, the number of times we met with our learner, the extent to which the learner's goals were being met, and any obstacles we were experiencing.

During the interim between the three in-person training sessions, we engaged in virtual chat sessions. We each set up our own AOL Instant Messenger account for the chat sessions and then logged on at a prearranged time. Usually no more than seven of us participated at one time. Virtual chat sessions are interesting and can be a useful way to ask questions, share information, and learn more as a group than individually. However, getting accustomed to the speed of chatting takes some time. This is multi-tasking at high speed. I tried to follow along what people were writing while I was trying to answer a question, but by the time my response was added to the list, a new question had appeared. The transcripts of the chat sessions were posted on the Coach's Corner Forum, accessible through the T\*M\*C website. It's rather comical to read the printed transcript because it doesn't flow like a normal conversation. It reads like a group of people who are each having their own conversation and by chance may be talking about the same

thing as someone else. However, the printed transcript reminded me of the many points that had been made, and I could then reflect on how to apply these to my own coaching. The transcripts of all chat sessions were available to us whether or not we participated, and reading all of the transcripts was helpful.

Cumbersome though the typing was, the virtual chat sessions were meaningful to me. For example, as librarians, we are seasoned providers of information. That's what we do either directly or indirectly, and the information we provide easily spills into advice. The coaching program, however, cautions against providing advice. Rather, we are to listen to our learners and guide them as they find their answers within themselves. Not giving advice is hard work, and through the chat sessions it was encouraging to me to discover this is a problem many others had. It was helpful to be reminded how important it is not to give advice, and to be able to share and learn from one another how to keep our mouths shut. Other issues also were raised and discussed that enhanced my coaching skills. For example, we discussed how to guide our learners in setting realistic goals, how to give meaningful feedback, what success in the coach-learner relationship looks like, and the necessity of building trust by respecting confidentiality in the coach-learner relationship. Kathryn Deiss and Veronda Pitchford, invaluable coaches to us, participated in all of the chat sessions. They guided the discussion as well as shared their expertise on the issue being discussed. Many times, though, the coaches were coaching the coaches. Without these virtual chat opportunities, I would not have had a chance to discuss problems and challenges with my colleagues until the next formal event.

When the coaches and learners were paired, the name, library, email address, phone number, and application form of our learner were sent to the coach by email. My learner and I had (and still have) the opportunity to meet in person. Her initial coaching need was for the development of a newly established program in her library and for effective communication with various people from other departments in her university. It took perhaps two meetings for us to know each other well enough that she could share the specific coaching needs she had. I took very seriously the caution against giving advice which we had learned in different ways during our first two days of training. I could easily have given advice, but it would have robbed my learner of finding for herself the best way to address various challenges. However, she had been expecting me to give advice; that's what she wanted from this coaching relationship. She wanted someone to tell her what to do. Several months later, she said she finally got it. That's when she told me about her expectations of advice from me, and when I didn't give her any, she was puzzled. She said, "You kept asking me questions, and I kept thinking, why doesn't she give me advice?" The questions, she later realized, guided her thinking as she came up with her own solutions. Not giving advice but knowing what questions to ask and how to ask them are key components of the T\*M\*C program. Sometimes now when we meet, we chat about our lives because there aren't any issues to discuss. But when an issue does arise, my learner can get to the heart of it so we can discuss it together. Sometimes we talk about her future and what sorts of experiences she needs to have depending on what she feels called to do. She is a woman of extraordinary talents and abilities and can achieve whatever she wants. I still sometimes coach her, but I am more often now her mentor. Sometimes I help her see a situation through my eyes of experience, and, yes, I sometimes give her advice.

The learners were invited to the second day of the second retreat. We tried to keep confidential the coach-learner pairings, but most of us guessed who was paired with whom—we had come to know each other too well. We role played in triads: learner, coach and observer. The observer identified strengths and weaknesses as we coached; the coaches learned and the learners understood more clearly the rationale for the coaching process. As someone soon to retire, I was delighted to see a group of young, fun, smart, energetic, engaged, and cool-looking librarians. What a group to guide the future of this wonderful profession; we are leaving it in good hands.

Three on-site training retreats provided readings, large and small group discussion, role play, and various other interactive learning experiences. Several articles by Edgar Schein and

Chris Argyris and others provided the background reading before and during our initial retreat, as well as between retreats. Especially comprehensive was Dennis C. Kinlaw's *Coaching for Commitment: Interpersonal Strategies for Obtaining Superior Performance from Individuals and Teams*. I found the models of SMART goals, the Johari Window, and the Ladder of Inference to be enlightening. We spent a significant amount of time on giving meaningful feedback, both positive and negative. It's easy to praise someone for a job well done, but positive feedback means giving the reasons the job is well done. Otherwise, it's empty praise and is meaningless. Harder, though, is negative feedback. I still struggle with how to do that in a meaningful, truthful and kind way. Role playing coaching scenarios gave us the experience and confidence both of coaching and of being critiqued in our coaching that we all needed prior to doing the "real thing."

Through the three on-site training retreats, the readings, my relationship with my learner, and the chat sessions, I have learned coaching skills that will transfer to other situations throughout my life. I learned especially the importance of listening and of asking guiding questions rather than giving advice. I think I am a good listener, and I've developed some self-discipline about giving advice. What in my coaching makes me the most uncomfortable is knowing how to ask the right question in the right way that will help my learner see the deepest and most meaningful way to solve a problem or to proceed with the next steps. I no longer worry that I will wreck someone's professional life with my inept coaching, but at the same time I hope I will always be humble about the privilege of serving as a coach.

The T\*M\*C Closing Reception with the coaches and the learners was held at the Cliff Dwellers Club in downtown Chicago overlooking Michigan Avenue, the Art Institute and Lake Michigan. We worked hard as coaches and learners in our training and in our relationships. This was a magnificent setting to close a significant experience.

I recently read over my application to the T\*M\*C program written over two years ago. I have a wonderful young librarian as my learner and we continue to meet biweekly. I have become a mentor to her now, although sometimes I'm a coach, too. She sometimes coaches me, also, and has become a seasoned listening guide. When I read the final paragraph of my application, I realized that what I hoped I would learn from the program I indeed have. Here it is. "What is most interesting to me in this program is what I expect to learn from those who are relatively new to the profession. I especially enjoy working with and learning from librarians and paraprofessionals new to the profession, who still have their idealism, see no problems as insurmountable, and have new ways of doing old things. Their new ideas energize and inspire me to try new ways also. Through these learners, I expect I will learn how I can do things better and more effectively. As with any teaching or coaching experience, I would learn more than the person who is coached; in particular, I would learn how to be a coach." Next Friday I will be retired, and I've found a lot more I can do with all I have learned in a profession I have loved.