

The “Studio Residency”: A Job-Embedded Coaching Model

by **Beth Boatright, PhD, and Chrysan Gallucci, PhD**
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Imagine having one day a month set aside for you and an expert coach to develop your professional skills. Imagine yourself studying a specific instructional issue that is anchored in your students’ learning needs, and that is something that you struggle to master each day. Imagine getting a chance to step back from the daily work of teaching to collect data on individual students’ reading comprehension or discussion skills, and “try on” a wide range of techniques at the hip of an experienced, qualified instructional coach.

Recent medical school graduates have the benefit of this kind of training when they are “in residency.” But teachers, principals, and central office leaders rarely get an opportunity to work side-by-side with skilled coaches or take risks in a controlled environment. Fortunately, this is beginning to change in Washington State. The Highline and Marysville school districts, for example, have begun to provide ongoing, job-embedded learning opportunities for their employees through a “studio residency” model.

What does a studio residency model look like?

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This article results from research on the CEL-district partnerships. In the fall of 2004, the authors initiated a qualitative research study into what, and how, a third-party support provider—the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington—engages districts in a collaborative teaching and learning partnership about instructional improvement. Using a three-year case study design, we collected and analyzed over 175 interviews and many more informal conversations, field notes from observations of over 135 district and school events, as well as artifacts from district, school, and classroom sources.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

In Highline, studio residencies are a joint enterprise of two schools. One hosts highly focused coaching activities onsite in a “studio” or “demonstration” classroom; the other sends staff to the first school to be “in residency” during these professional development activities. Each month they flip-flop so that teachers and leaders from both schools have a chance to host the studio classroom and travel offsite to observe others. The host teacher’s classroom serves as a “studio” for her and others’ professional learning.

Principals from both “residency” and “studio” schools typically observe these professional learning opportunities, as do many central office leaders. External expertise is provided by an external instructional consultant – contracted through the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington – who typically facilitates the studio residency work around a previously agreed-upon aspect of instructional practice.

Studio residencies can span multiple days across multiple settings within a host school. The format typically involves a pre-observation discussion, observation, and post-observation debrief. Participants may gather in a conference room to discuss a particularly vexing instructional issue, then silently observe this instructional issue in practice at the studio classroom, and then discuss their observations and possible next steps as a large group back in the conference room.

A CASE IN POINT

We observed over 23 days of studio residencies in Highline between 2005 and 2007.² One in particular stands out as an example of expert-guided professional development that actively engaged educators at multiple levels of the district. In the spring of 2006, principals and teachers from three elementary schools, as well as instructional coaches, Highline central office leaders, and a CEL consultant (roughly ten adults total) studied how classroom “book clubs” might prompt authentic text-based conversations among fifth graders. For two days these adults “in residency” were released from their jobs to focus on a school-wide problem of practice.

DAY ONE

Day One of this studio residency began with an observation of Laura (pseudonym), the studio teacher, as she did a Read Aloud of a mystery book with her fifth grade students.³ The students sat on the floor as she read the book and periodically paused to ask the group questions about what they heard. Sometimes Laura asked the group of students to “turn and talk” to a partner about what they were thinking. Laura was teaching the characteristics of mysteries as a genre of literature. Lyn, the CEL consultant, sat next to Laura as she taught the Read Aloud.

Meanwhile, the adults in “residency” observed closely and took notes on what students were saying in their paired discussions. Switching between whole-group and paired discussions was intended to gradually release students from the guidance of the teacher and build their independence as thinkers. In doing so, it became clear that students could not yet build upon each others’ comments to produce a complex idea; the students needed more scaffolding. After class, the adults debriefed what they saw and decided to use Day Two to observe the same students in four-person discussions about a shared text. These “book clubs” were going to be a vehicle for strengthening students’ reading comprehension, as well as their abilities to participate in basic text analysis through group discussion. The adults agreed to do some of their own homework: to read about building productive book clubs in Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Reading*.

DAY TWO

Day Two began with an hour-long discussion among the adults about what authentic, text-based conversations might look like at the fifth grade level. Laura, still the studio teacher, excused herself early to begin teaching. Ten minutes later, the group of adults entered her classroom just as students were beginning to meet in their four-person book clubs. Whatever transpired in Laura’s classroom would be the basis for future discussions. No one expected perfection. In fact, Lyn reiterated that they were “just collecting data” on the students’ ability to hold text-based discussions.

As students settled into their book clubs, it appeared that some “conversations” were simply a mix of unrelated statements. One student would put an idea on the table, but get no response. Another student in the same book club would put forth a different idea, without building upon the first student’s idea. Groups were literally not on the same page; it seemed like students did not know how to get their peers to address their ideas – or were unaware that they were supposed to do so. Laura approached Lyn halfway across the room to chat briefly about this problem. Lyn agreed that this problem was occurring in multiple book clubs, and that the larger issue was getting students to “become accountable to their book groups.”

After class, the adults convened in the conference room to debrief. Lyn emphasized that there was a greater issue of accountability at stake:

Lyn: Students need to know that they are accountable to their book club, and that it’s everyone’s responsibility to keep track of the discussions.

A teacher (from the visiting school): Yeah! I want my students to care about what their peers are saying, but they’re not there yet either. (Addressing the group) What do you do about that?

Ensuing conversation led to a discussion of next steps for Laura, and some suggestions for professional reading on authentic text-based conversations at the elementary level. In this example the studio resi-

gency model allowed Laura to address a real problem of practice with her colleagues and principal in a non-threatening environment. The studio residency also provided a space for visiting teachers to gather ideas for their own professional development.

DOES IT WORK?

We saw evidence that these studio residencies also prompted veteran teachers to rethink their practice. One explained that she had been formerly “lulled into a false sense of progress” with a seemingly high-performing reader. After participating as a studio teacher, she learned how to better identify and address students’ strengths and challenges in reading. She commented,

I think this is a new mindset for a lot of teachers. They always think of [*professional development*] in terms of, “Here comes another program.” But the whole approach to [*studio residencies*] is not a program. It’s, “How can we refine our craft? How can we get better and add to our knowledge base and be willing to take some risks?”

Forty-five miles to the north, the Marysville School District implemented what they call “studio days” in 2005 with the same literacy consultant from CEL.⁴ One Marysville middle school teacher claimed that studio residencies helped him realize that he had been doing most of the work for students, by leading them to preferred answers. Through these professional learning opportunities, he learned that “students [*are*] actually able to look at their own work—that their biggest struggle [*is*] just hearing their own voice[s].”

Seeing such a visible influence of professional development on practice is rare, but our data lead us to believe that this type of job-embedded coaching has prompted teachers to “try on” new instructional techniques that are likely to improve learning outcomes for struggling students. Although the focus of our study was on teacher learning and not on the model’s impact on student achievement, it is clear that positive trends are emerging in the development of teachers’ content knowledge and their awareness of students’ learning needs. In situations where educational leaders reserved time and funds for a literacy expert to guide classroom-embedded profession-

al learning opportunities and also followed up with instructional coaching support between the studio residency events we observed teachers starting to develop new practices.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF THIS MODEL

Powerful professional development can – and does – deepen teachers’ subject matter when it resides within a content domain (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Grossman, Stodolsky, & Knapp, 2004; Stodolsky, 1988). Furthermore, when teachers work on the problems of practice that arise in their own classrooms, they steadily accumulate new practices that are anchored in their own students’ learning needs.

What sets the studio residency model apart from most professional development offered to teachers is that it involves:

- real students and real problems of teaching practice,
- teachers released from their everyday responsibilities,
- external instructional expertise *as well as* teachers’ own knowledge about practice
- ongoing participation from building and district leaders,
- sustained participation with a group of people over several sessions a year.

The job-embedded nature of these professional learning experiences increases the likelihood that teachers will be able to transfer what they learn into their own classroom practices (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). But the model is not without its challenges. Successful studio residencies require districts to fund teacher release time and expert consultant wages. The model also calls for a great deal of time and energy to sort out the logistics. Given these parameters, studio residencies tend to be intentional, well-planned events that are aimed at building the capacity of a few educators who could then be sources of expertise for others. However, the current push for increasing all students’ test scores sometimes makes such a large investment in a small group of people a hard sell.

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