



@CoP

Setting the Scene

This virtual CoP introduced an online group coaching model focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL).

CoP facilitator and coach, Charles Marriott, led a group of teacher interns and later, a group of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme leaders through an introductory coaching session to demonstrate the process of social-emotional learning using online group coaching.

SEL deepens self-awareness and self-management skills, builds emotional resilience and confidence, and improves relationship skills. As such it enables interns to better deal with issues that might otherwise hinder their development as teachers – and equip them to model positive behaviour for learners.

Group SEL addresses the human needs of belonging and safety, creating an environment that supports self-reflection and sharing. There are no wrongs or rights, all contributions are helpful, and the group itself forms the resource for learning.

Welcome and introduction

Charles explained the CoP steps for the day invited everyone to check in with their names, organisations and ‘best thing about them’. There was a notable leaning towards maths and science in the (virtual) room – which introduced a further dimension, as social-emotional learning involved engaging each other using the right side of the brain.

To establish a shared understanding of coaching for the session, people used the Mentimeter (a collaborative online tool) to indicate ideas they associated with coaching.

These words were also helpful in understanding how to help interns in the realm of SEL.

Some ideas discussed:

- The most-used words, *support* and *guiding*, appropriately reflect coaching’s ‘fairly hands-off’ approach to development.
- The terms *mentoring* and *coaching* tend to be used interchangeably in South Africa, but there is a small but important distinction between them: *mentoring* tends to take a more instructional approach, where someone with experience helps another, whereas *coaching* is more about asking.
- Rather than telling people what to do, coaching is about ‘asking people to tell themselves’ – the aim being for people to find answers within themselves and guide themselves with the help of the coach. This approach is crucial for creating sustainable change.



Online group coaching model for social-emotional learning

Online group coaching is empowering because:	
It is relevant	It addresses personal behavioral issues that are often neglected and can stand in the way of young people becoming good teachers. These relate to the way people manage themselves at an emotional level, for e.g. in terms of time and relationships.
It fosters equality and enquiry	It creates an environment where people feel that whatever they say, matters. It leads with questions, rather than telling participants what to do or think and creates a platform for people to enquire about themselves, and from each other.
It fosters a sense of belonging	A group coaching environment gives people a sense of being part of something meaningful, and that they don't have to do it all alone. Being part of a group also enables collaborative learning – people see that they share similar social and emotional challenges and learn from each other's ways of coping.
It creates a safe environment	Many young people are more comfortable with online coaching because they don't have to be seen, just heard. This makes it easier to be open and vulnerable. The feeling of belonging plays a big role in fostering this sense of safety.
It fosters responsibility and accountability	The group coaching model enables people to take charge of their lives. Instead of telling them what to do, it hands the power over to them – they own the problems or challenges, and together find solutions. The coach is there to guide that process. From a learning perspective, this benefit is key.
It is time and cost efficient	It is efficient, especially in terms of time and cost, provided data is available, and connectivity is good. The model work well using phones.

Questions / comments on the model:

- Is this the same as peer-to-peer teaching?
 - It is similar in that the participants are the resource, and between them they have the answers. The coach guides the process, helping participants to arrive at those answers collaboratively.

- The sense of confidentiality in schools is often fractured, and it can be difficult to speak to someone of higher rank. This can threaten the growth we hope to achieve through coaching. It is crucial to establish a sense of safety and a safe space where teacher interns feel safe to share.
 - Coaches need to make themselves emotionally available to the group, and constantly re-contract with the group by asking for permission and checking their understanding of what is possible. Coaches need to be extremely aware of the power and privilege they carry, and to name it if necessary, to reduce the level of hierarchy.

“In this online coaching model everyone is right, partially, everything that is shared is useful, and together the group arrives at the answer – unlike in our education system, where being right or wrong is the primary benchmark for quality, and as a result, many trainee teachers keep their thoughts to themselves – to avoid being wrong.”

“The ultimate goal of SEL is to develop ownership and agency. If we are going to have great educators, we need interns to develop the process by which they can say ‘I can’, and ‘I will’, and make what they are doing their own. Agency is also about having independence of mind, where people don't feel they have to copy what is going on around them.”

Demonstrating the online SEL group learning model – teacher interns explore the topic of trust

After a reminder that they were not under any pressure to ‘give the right answer’, Charles used a series of questions to lead the group to explore the issue of trust. [This summary gives a sense of the interaction.]

What comes to mind when you think of trust?

Connected to being loyal	Goes hand-in-hand with honesty
Goes with being reliable	Associated with confidentiality and safety
Has to do with belonging	About having confidence and being hopeful

How do you feel about the idea of confidence?

Responses included these ideas: Trusting someone is about taking a risk. That person has to make it easier for you to open up and engage by giving you the trust and confidence to share.

How do you rate your own level of confidence?

Most group members gave themselves high scores. Some said they were not confident with everybody, or in every situation. This often arose from comparing themselves with others (or what they saw in others), which could be intimidating. This could lead to negative thoughts, to perceptions of difference, or to questioning whether they could perform at the same level.

Building on ideas shared by the group:

- It takes confidence to trust – but it is easier to trust people who are confident, and so our confidence grows as we take the risk (it is self-perpetuating). A high level of confidence is visible to others.
- The environment is a big factor in our willingness to trust and our level of confidence. We also create our own environment in the way we treat each other – e.g. in addition to the external environment, the interns themselves can create a difficult space for each other, by being intimidating.
- We need to trust ourselves, if we are going to trust others – and we can easily do ourselves down, e.g. by comparing ourselves to each other.

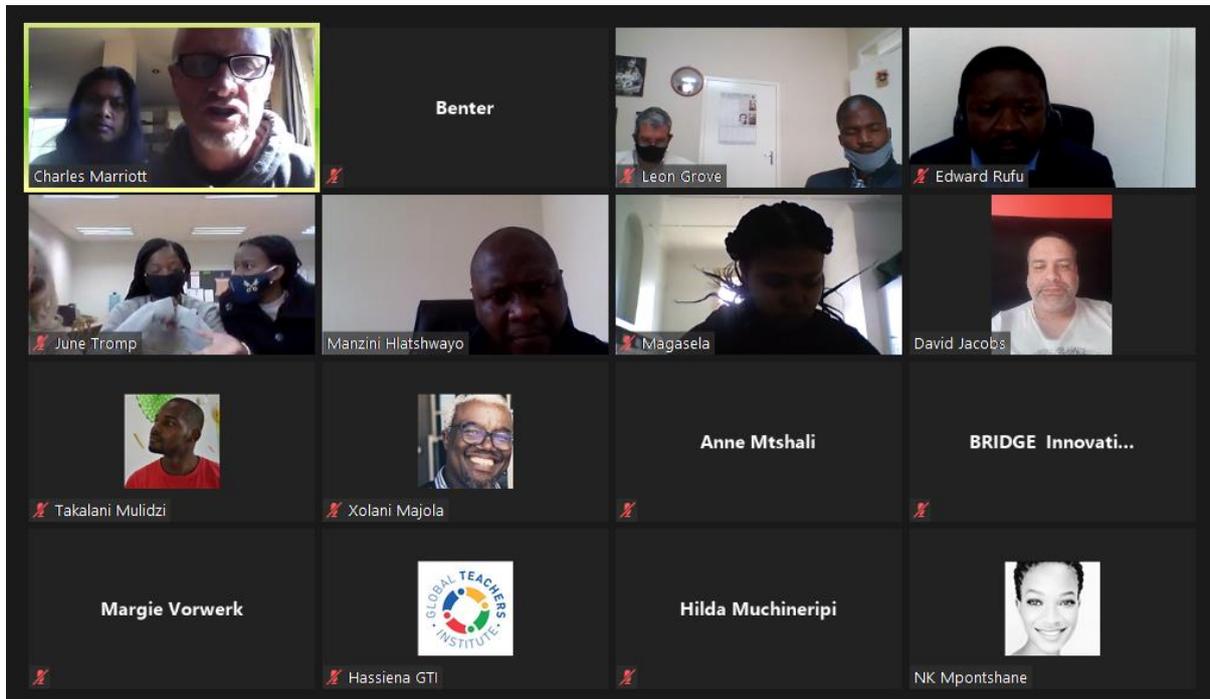
Which image better illustrates the ingredients of trust?



In A, the girls are balancing by their own efforts – they are touching hands but not really ‘giving anything’.

In B, they are giving each other weight, force and support in order to achieve balance – they need to work together to create the pressure that makes the ‘trust bridge’ work. If one girl falls, both will.

The interns then joined Charles in a short debriefing and were given this question to think about: **Where in your work life or homelife are you not giving enough trust? Where do you need to give more force – to give more of yourself – in order to build trust and create balance?**



Screengrab showing a few of the CoP participants



CoP discussion

People commented very positively on the process and the quality of the interns' response, highlighting their confidence, positive energy and openness, and commending the coach for creating an environment in which they felt safe to share their thoughts and feelings. For most interns, this had been their first exposure to this kind of online interaction.

A few comments, showing the range:

- We often hear worrying calls about not having good teachers coming through from ITE, but when we look at this meeting, we can see so much happening that is positive.
- We don't want to turn our interns and young teachers into copies of ourselves; they need to be better than we are, and to use their unique talents and personalities to become great teachers.
- It is very encouraging to see this level of confidence – ideally, we want students to be confident enough to say they don't know, to ask questions of themselves and the process, as they seek to understand.
- The big question is how to spread the qualities we see here to other interns not part of these programmes, so they can carry these same characteristics on their journey to becoming educators.
- It was interesting to see the process being driven by the interns' inputs, and how the presenter used their thinking to build the presentation, while giving all an opportunity to speak and avoiding anyone dominating the discussion.

"I couldn't help noticing the interns' confidence and willingness to engage and share, even when put into vulnerable positions. Kudos to all those programmes that have created that environment for their interns to grow and develop."

- I loved the rigour of the process – Charles' interrogative style got the interns to do some hard thinking and reflecting.

Charles emphasized that the process of SEL coaching does not always proceed as smoothly and can take several sessions for people to trust the process (and themselves) sufficiently to open up. He also noted these points:

- From the coach's perspective, the key ingredient to making the model work is to build a trusting relationship across the digital divide.
- The online element is an enabler, making it possible for participants to connect with likeminded people across the country.
- This model is not limited to the school environment but can give rise to an array of other innovations and cross-pollinations.

“Confidence can be transposed into many different contexts and used in so many ways; it is a key ingredient to changing the education landscape.”

Educators / programme leaders experience the model first-hand

After a reminder that everyone is a leader in some capacity, and that all contributions are ‘right partially, and together build the whole’, Charles led a group of educators/ programme leaders through an exploration of leadership, focusing on two aspects:

What is great about yourself as a leader?

Responses included:

- knowing oneself, and having self-regard
- seeing value in others, and learning from them
- leading from the front; doing it first before asking it of others
- believing in and extracting the potential of others
- the ability to act, to get things done
- creating balance between the task, the people, and the targets
- having unconditional positive regard for others
- loyalty toward direct reports as well as others in the organisation
- creating space and a conducive environment for other leaders to participate
- giving others a platform in which to find expression
- approaching leadership as a shared responsibility, not as something that resides in only one source
- recognizing that different people have different leadership strengths, and enhancing these
- being comfortable with sharing power and responsibility
- enabling others (including learners, interns, and teachers) to develop their leadership capacity.

“An important aspect of greatness in leadership is doing the work about ourselves, just as much as enabling others.”

What do you find difficult about leadership?

Several members of the educators' group drew attention to the challenges inherent in balancing tensions between different leadership roles, the importance of emotional intelligence and flexibility, and the humility required in leadership. Responses included:

- Wanting to enable people to develop in their own way, at their own pace, but having to push them in a particular direction to meet organisational goals
- Balancing the need to meet deliverables and deadlines with having empathy and compassion – especially now that staff and their families are facing Covid-19 fears and problems.
- Having to say no to good ideas, while still maintaining the motivation of one's team

- Encouraging diversity while maintaining a unified approach required in terms of organisational mandates
- Accepting that something isn't working, despite having put effort into making it a success.

Benefits of the group coaching model

In addition to the many benefits already mentioned, the model also:

- works well for people who lead organisations
- is a resource which enables people to feel supported
- creates space to reflect, self-question and self-affirm
- fosters a culture of self-affirmation, which is the ultimate way of building self-confidence.

“Several in the group were hesitant to say what was great about themselves but went on to do a great job of modelling what it means to self-affirm. In framing SEL we highlight that group coaching creates a space where people can be vulnerable – and it takes vulnerability to self-affirm and to self-question.”

Charles also noted that it takes courage to be vulnerable as a leader – this is a platform where people can be courageous in ways they normally wouldn't get a chance to be, for example to say, “I haven't got all the answers and can we talk about it?”

Typically, the model would be in a longer format and the coach's role would be to 'poke harder', to encourage diverging views. The richness of the learning process in this model is that the coach both supports and challenges people's thinking, so that they stretch their thinking as far as possible.

“What stood out for me was the common strain amongst participants of selflessness, and of being of service to those around them.”

Takeaways

- The importance of promoting good leaders with the right motivation and who are passionate about education into leadership positions in education, so that as a country we start achieving the right kinds of educational outcomes
- Understanding that becoming the kind of leader everyone would want is a process
- The value of connecting with others in a similar situation, and how this can benefit one's own development as a leader
- The importance of positivity and believing in the potential of others, irrespective of their position
- The need to invest in the process in order to take something out
- The importance of having trust in the people we work with, and to put in as much as we expect of them
- The opportunity to network across multiple levels, seeing interns from programmes other than our own, and learning from other leaders
- Confidence and trust feed off each other in developing good mentor/ mentee relationships
- The importance of making time for interactions like this
- Seeing how much value there is in diversity – the true strength of a CoP such as this is the opportunity to hear differing opinions.

Next steps

There was a lot of interest in taking this further. It would be more skills development focused – but would still offer opportunities for people to reflect and to bring their experience into the room (including breakaway group discussions to enable more people's voices to be heard). The education space needs people with the skills to enable conversations such as this.