# Best Practice in Bridging the Theory to Practice Gap: On-Demand Modules and Accompanying Coaching Guides

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**Abstract:** As the field shifts towards personalized professional development for teachers and teacher candidates, traditional coaching structures are often remaining in place. On-Demand Modules leverage technology to aid the personalization of support by presenting best pedagogical theory on very specific topics in manageable, 60 minute chunks. The Coaching Guides attached to each On-Demand Module support the coach in guiding further discussion and reflection to assure that the theory that was presented is translated into concrete and meaningful practice in the classroom.

## Introduction

Differentiated instruction in the K-12 classroom has been included in teachings "best practices" for some time now. While we know the benefits of maximizing student potential through differentiation, differentiated professional development has only recently become an expectation of quality teacher support. It is an even more rare addition to teacher preparation programs. However, Arizona State University is leveraging the advances in online learning to design On-Demand Modules for targeted support of their future graduates. On-Demand Modules are free, research-based, online professional development that can be used to support teachers and teacher candidates on specific topics related to teaching practice. As our program has observed the On-Demand Modules implemented in both the college of education and in partner school districts, we quickly identified a need to support the coaches and instructors supporting teachers and teacher candidates on their individual growth plans. From this, Coaching Guides were created and attached to each On-Demand Module. While each module contains a Foundation, Resource, and Application section to help the learner bring the nebulous theory down to actionable information to implement in the classroom, coaches and instructors are, very reasonably, unable to spend time acquainting themselves with each of the 60 minute On-Demand Modules the teachers or teacher candidates they support need individually

## Literature Review

Differentiated professional development is now a hallmark piece of our program at ASU and our teacher candidate experience as well. However, we know that many of our partner districts and fellow teacher preparation programs continue to rely upon "one-size-fits-all" professional development programs due to time and cost restraints. For teacher candidates and teachers in these situations rather than tailored and individually targeted support, they are often required to sit through an all-day (or course) mandated session or read a book on a topic that may or may not address their individual needs. Research on customized professional development continues to show

that teachers feel a high sense of agency when adopting customized mobile learning programs (Pachler, Backmair, and Cook, 2009) because they can control the time, place, content and pace of the experience. In this instance, differentiated "just enough, just-in-time, just-for-me" mobile learning may "create a personalized tailored learning journey," (Kearney, Schuck, Burden & Aubsson, 2012) which can "lead to a strong sense of ownership of one's learning," (Traxler, 2007).

With the benefits and importance of differentiated instruction well-established and recognized, our program began, in earnest, designing resources to meet this need. With adult learning theory in mind, we created our first On-Demand Modules which we quickly sough feedback on through pilot testing with a variety of stakeholders. From this, we learned many valuable lessons on the length of time a user was willing to sit through a module, and the importance of thoughtful interaction built into the module. Once our modules began to be used more widely by instructors in the program and by instructional coaches in our partner districts, we learned the true importance of supporting these groups in their attempt to differentiate professional development for their teachers. Because we had spent so much time gaining feedback from the end user, we had not yet considered the feedback of coaches and barriers they may have to recommending our modules to those they support, although the link is quite obvious now. To that end, the Coaching Guide was created and attached to each On-Demand Module.

While research has regularly shown that the role of the mentor teacher is vital to the development of teacher candidates in a number of ways, research on the effects of coaching is lacking (Gallucci, DeVoogt Van Lare, Yook & Boatright, 2010). We know that the quality of a mentor teacher can result in teacher candidates receiving higher employee ratings once employed, (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007), increased perceived competence upon entering the field and a stronger desire to remain in the field (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O'Brien, 1995; Browne 1992; NCATE 2010). We also know that teacher candidates consistently rate their mentor teacher as the greatest influence on their development (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Tighe, 1991). Because coaches serve a similar role in many districts, we feel the role they play is equally central to the development of quality teachers and thus, crucial to ensuring the content of our On-Demand Modules are carried into the classrooms of the teachers who complete them.

Because substantial change in instructional practice can be difficult to achieve on a wide scale (Hubbard et al., 2006; Knapp, 1997; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999; Supovitz, 2006), the need for quality coaching support is increasing important. However, while the theory behind co-teaching posits that the role of the mentor teacher and teacher candidate be explicitly clear from the beginning for the relationship to be successful, for coaches there are "surprising little peer-reviewed research that 1) defines the parameters of the role, 2) describes and contextualizes the work of instructional coaching, or 3) explains how individuals learn to be coaches and are supported to refine their practice over time," (Gallucci, DeVoogt Van Lare, Yook & Boatright, 2010). Nonetheless, their importance is documented in a few studies which suggest that quality coaching can support changing professional development agendas (Hubbard et al., 2006; Stein & D'Amico, 2002).

## Innovation

First and foremost, the innovation that started this work was our innovation in the creation of On-Demand Modules. From this work, the need for coaching support was identified and we further innovated to create Coaching Guides for each and every one of our modules, specific to the module. As mentioned previously, Coaching Guides support coaches and instructors via a one page synopsis of the On-Demand Module so they feel comfortable recommending their use to those they support without having to complete each and every On-Demand Module first. With differentiated support comes the dilemma of supporting several teachers in their own areas of refinement without spending hours combing through resources directed to myriad topics. Because the On-Demand Modules are research-based and we have leveraged the expertise of our faculty at our Research One institution, coaches using our modules are confident in the quality of the content and are now supported in their coaching sessions with our addition of Coaching Guides.

## Best Practice

Coaching Guides are created uniquely for each and every On-Demand Module we create and are easily accessible by the coach or instructor on landing page of each module. They are aimed to support coaches and instructors by providing a one page overview of the On-Demand Module that includes: a summary (objective, activities); key takeaways (essential knowledge, essential skill, essential mindset); the skill in action (what it would look like in the classroom if you are observing for change after completion); questions for discussion (to engage in reflective dialogue as they attempt to implement the skill); aligned InTASC standards; and the On-Demand Module's takeaway tool. We believe this is a best practice in bridging the theory to practice gap that other online learning programs should consider. In our previous development of On-Demand Modules, we spent a majority of our time considering how to support teachers in their learning in our modules. Coaching Guides are helping to bridge the gap between theory and observable practice once users have left the online learning environment through Coaching Guides that not only reiterate the learning, but also provide prompts for further reflection with a coach or instructor via a blended learning tool.

## Conclusion

In order to best support coaches and move the field forward in the research around such practice, we are leveraging the expertise of our institution to create Coaching Guides and design evaluation plans around their effectiveness in doing so. We know how important the role of the mentor teacher is for our developing teachers, but research on the role coaches and instuctors play and how we define their role continues to lag behind. By adding Coaching Guides to our On-Demand Modules, we are attempting to support coaches in their quest to support teachers in the most meaningful and targeted way. Coaching Guides allow them to differentiate their support without adding to their already full plates. Future work will revolve around further evaluating the use and implementation of the Coaching Guide to further refine their design. It will also focus on how to prepare coaches to take on the task of differentiating professional development for teachers, and how to support coaches in their professional development.

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