TNTP reimagine teaching

Tips for Coaching Virtually

March 2020

TNTP has extensive experience coaching teachers and leaders in virtual settings since 2012. Given the social distancing guidance currently in effect as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have compiled guidance on best practices for virtual coaching.

What makes virtual coaching successful?

Set Clear Expectations Up Front

- **Participant Selection**
  Virtual coaching projects are most successful when it is clear to the teacher/leader why they are participating. This is most effective either when participants self-select in or when all members of a group are participating. Consistent engagement with virtual coaching can be more difficult when only some members of a program or cohort are participating.

- **Coaches set clear parameters for participant engagement**
  It should be clear to the participant at the outset how often they will engage in virtual coaching, what is expected of them throughout the process., and the consequences of not engaging. Be thoughtful about your regular interactions with participants—requesting unnecessary information or frequently changing procedures can lead to confusion and decreased motivation.

- **Framing from their principal or other leader**
  Our most successful virtual coaching contracts have happened when district leaders are involved with the process and do initial introductions, particularly when they can say how excited they are for the program. Get district leaders on an initial Zoom call or—at the very least—have them send out an email to build participant engagement from the jump.

Be Transparent and Responsive

- **Set specific focus areas**
  Virtual coaching is most effective when the specific value-add is defined in advance. We've found the virtual medium is more effective in developing a vision for content rather than classroom management or relationship building. See below for sample goals that would be appropriate for virtual coaching.

- **Keep the feedback loop short**
  Try to join virtual lessons live rather than watching recordings of lessons. If you are not able to join live, it's important to share feedback within 24 hours—the same rule applies for sharing feedback on a lesson plan or other deliverable. Be sure to block out time in your calendar to keep yourself on track and your participants bought in.

- **An easy-to-follow support plan**
  Coaches should outline and clearly communicate what their "program" for virtual support may look like. In our experience, it's most helpful to do this on a monthly basis, so it's easy for everyone to keep track of. This helps make coaching feel cohesive and not like a series of separate conversations.

Make technology easy to use

- **Assess technology access and adapt as needed**

When technology is easy to use, participants in virtual coaching are more invested. Ask participants if they have reliable access to technology. To engage in virtual coaching meetings, participants will need access to a reliable laptop, tablet, or smartphone, as well as broadband internet. If some participants do not have access to what they need, either help them secure it or plan meetings on the phone.

- **Ask your team to download the video platform you'll use**
  We suggest either Zoom or Google Hangouts, both of which are easy to use and have their own help centers. (Though this is not an endorsement, we find Zoom easiest to use if your team is not already using Gmail or other Google applications.)

  Zoom: You can download Zoom here and access how-to guides and support materials here.

  Google Hangouts: You can download Google Hangouts here and access how-to guides and support materials here.

- **Do a test run**
  Have a 15-minute meeting to work out the kinks. Can you all log in? Can you all get your microphone and speakers to work? Troubleshoot challenges *before* a coaching call to save significant frustration as participants learn new technology.

Use Goals to Drive Results

Virtual coaching relies heavily on the use of SMART goals to focus attention on the highest priority work and ensure a clear vision of success to which we hold ourselves accountable.

The use of goals-based coaching allows virtual coaches to:
- Plan effectively to maximize coaching interactions
- Assess progress along the way and adapt to increase impact
- Articulate a clear pathway to success that motivates coaches and gets teachers and leaders invested

Virtual coaches should draft goals and share them with participants to build a collaborative partnership and to provide clarity on the intended outcomes of virtual interactions.

Given most educators are now operating in distance learning, here are sample SMART goals*:

FOR TEACHERS	FOR LEADERS
- Teachers will have a distance learning model in place by X date that incorporates synchronous meetings using Google Classroom or Zoom, with asynchronous daily lessons from the Wit and Wisdom Curriculum and clear expectations for student assignments, submissions, and how they'll receive feedback. - By X date, teachers will have a system for two-way communication with students and families in use, and a plan for how to clearly communicate that new system to students and parents.	- Leaders will articulate a school-wide vision & expectations for distance learning by X date - Leaders will invest teachers, students, and families in school vision and expectations for distance learning. - Leaders will have systems and structures in place to drive toward school vision for distance learning by X date. - Leader will draft a time-bound strategy to manage the change process through the start of school year 2020-2021. - By X date, we will create systems and structures to recruit and select high-quality teachers in alignment with our framework for effective teaching. - By X date, we will create systems and structures for continuing to deliver teacher

professional learning in alignment with our current year scope and sequence.

These are only sample goals and ones that might only be relevant for a short window of time. More important than the perfect SMART goal, however, is meeting teachers and leaders where they are and actively, authentically listening to them to figure out how your coaching will be most effective.

Examples of virtual coaching structures

One-on-One Virtual Coaching Cycle
Here's a breakdown of an in-depth coaching cycle that could be done in one week* and is **approximately 3.5-4 hours of coaching work per teacher to complete the cycle:**

- 30 minutes: Call with teacher to plan/work together on distance learning element. After the call, teacher sends coach plans/artifacts.
- 30-60 minutes: Coach reviews plans and/or artifacts teacher sends and provides feedback. Teacher makes changes and notes questions.
- 60 min: Call with teacher to finalize/co-create plans, assignments, or video lessons, post-feedback
- Teacher sends coach post-lesson artifacts (student work, taped lesson, etc.) with initial reflections
- 30 minutes: Coach reviews student work artifacts, provides feedback, and plans for coaching call.
- 30 minutes: Call with teacher to reflect on this round of distance learning plans and their success. Set priority area for next round of planning.
- 30 minutes (optional): Connect with admin or school coach about progress

There are variations of this that can result in shorter touchpoints (group planning calls, shorter calls, less in-depth coaching documents, etc.), and the time spent will vary based on the needs of the teacher.

Note: Weekly coaching isn't necessary. In fact, bi-weekly or monthly coaching is usually the right frequency. However, notice that the coaching interactions are condensed within a week to generate a quick feedback loop and be most useful to the participant.

Group Coaching Cycle

Coaching can also be done in a group or cohort. This approach can be more efficient and cost-effective, while also capitalizing on collaboration among participants. This approach works best when all participants are working to build the same knowledge and/or skill, which makes this a great option for schools that are tackling distance learning together.

Group coaching is made up of a combination of group learning and one-on-one coaching as needed. All participants in the group work toward the same or a similar goal for their coaching, and participate in a combination of the following:

- **Group learning experiences led by a facilitator:** For guidance on planning for and leading group professional learning online, go here: Leading Successful Professional Learning
- **Collaborative experiences with other participants:** Participants work together to apply learning in their day-to-day. This collaboration can be structured by the coach, rely on existing collaboration structures within their school, or be left up to participants to decide.
- **Individual follow-up:** In this scenario, the one-on-one coaching is a follow-up to the group learning. Individual time, if provided, should focus on implementation of previous learning and address any individual needs that may create barriers to implementation.

How can I build trust in a virtual environment?

When it comes to learning, particularly with virtual learning, one of the most important questions is: How do I build trust so I can bring participants to the table and help them learn something they will value and act upon? We have to model building trust with participants to enable their learning and break the culture of compliance.

Get to know your teachers/leaders and help them know you: Start with their "why." Why are they doing this work? What is their main motivating factor? When working with a group, leverage framing this as community work and the power of the community, though you may want to avoid the term "PLC," which sometimes has a negative connotation. It's often helpful to send out an initial quick survey with questions about their interests, their contact information, what they hope to learn, and a link to a place they can sign up for an initial, 30-minute get-to-know-you call.

Respect their time: Begin and end on time. Plan an agenda in advance to ensure you have enough time to meet the intended outcomes of the call. Use bulleted lists and tables in written communication to make information quick and easy to read. If there is an action item, put <Action Item by [date]> in the subject line.

Be transparent: A lack of transparency can be stressful for participants and impede their learning. Provide agendas for meetings beforehand and give adequate time to prepare for discussion questions so participants feel confident in sharing their thoughts. Record growth using shared documents that the participant can edit as well. Show participants how you are changing your coaching based on their feedback. ("Last time we met, you mentioned x, so today we will y.")

Be responsive and holistic: Collaboratively establish the purpose of your coaching relationship through active listening and goal-setting. Empathetically listen for any urgent needs the participant shows up with and be prepared to advise and consult where appropriate while maintaining integrity as a coach.

Have a shared document where you can communicate goals, progress toward goals, next steps, and resources: This type of coaching document clearly communicates goals to participants and should be hosted in a platform where it can be edited by both coach and participant, such as SharePoint or Google Docs. This document can work as a landing page for keeping everyone updated as opposed to a string of emails. In addition to goals and next steps, you can also use this document to link to notes you took while watching the instruction.