



# Is tech intimidating your teachers? Try coaching

BY JULIANNE B. ROSS-KLEINMANN

**T**he 21st century is an exciting time for integrating technology in schools. Technology can help educators close digital use, digital design, and accessibility gaps by allowing us to tailor educational

experiences to meet every learner's needs (U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2024). It can also help us prepare students for future jobs that have not yet been defined by leveraging and building skills like engineering design,

computer sciences, artificial intelligence, computational thinking, and more.

However, technology can feel intimidating and overwhelming to many educators. I know the feeling. Even though I am now a technology specialist who helps teachers plan



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## TEACH: MY COACHING PHILOSOPHY

My coaching philosophy can be summarized with the word TEACH:

- T = Build **t**rust.
- E = Create **e**quity.
- A = **A**dvocate on students', teachers', and families' behalf.
- C = **C**ollaborate with everyone.
- H = Be **h**umble and infuse humor.

lessons and units that integrate the right technology tool to motivate their students while enhancing and extending students' knowledge, I was not always tech-savvy.

I remember once calling for tech support because my printer was not working. When help arrived, I was embarrassed to discover the simple fix to the problem: plugging in the printer.

Fortunately, the person who came to help me asked if I would like to meet regularly to learn about basic technology setup, troubleshooting, and navigation. She recognized that when technology does not work the first time, it can stall our academic goals for working with it, sometimes turning people off to using technology altogether. She gave me an opportunity to break that cycle.

After working with her for a short time, I was so excited about what I was learning that I shared it with the students and teachers in the building and tried to help make others equally excited and comfortable with technology.

That was the beginning of my path to becoming a technology coach. A

technology coach is a role that provides essential support for teachers with technology integration in the classroom (Howard, 2019).

Technology coaches like me constantly confront questions like these: How do we support teachers who might not share our excitement for technology? How do we help them overcome their resistance or even outright hostility so they can use technology in ways that really make a difference for students?

I have learned that the answers have nothing to do with gadgets or gizmos, programs or products. Like other kinds of coaching, the secret lies in building relationships. By listening to a teacher, being flexible enough to prove that you listened, making them comfortable so that they can both talk and listen, and being responsive to their expressed needs, technology coaches can help teachers confront and address their technology challenges.

## BUILDING TRUST

I remember starting a new role in 2014 as a technology coordinator, tasked with introducing elementary

teachers and students to creative and fun ways to learn STEM and computer science skills.

On my first day, as I walked into a classroom, the teacher turned to me and said, "I hate technology!" Those words echoed loud and clear, not only in front of me but in front of the entire class. All those young, impressionable 1st and 2nd graders turned their eyes up toward me, the new technology teacher, some shouting "Yeah!" in agreement.

Feeling powerless, defeated, and angry, I wondered: Did everyone at my new school share this sentiment? And if they did, what caused them to feel this way? I believed that finding those answers would allow me to carve a new path forward for my school, one rich with an integrated technology curriculum. I approached the situation as a growth opportunity for me and all the teachers I was working with, and I started by building trust with the resistant teacher.

First, I found a partner who valued technology integration and was a trusted and valued member of the school community — a teacher I had met during the interview process. As

the high school science co-chair and a member of my interview committee, she had expressed her belief in the importance of introducing students as young as kindergarten to age-appropriate STEM and computer science skills.

When I approached her about collaborating, she readily agreed, and we worked together on a STEM lesson for a 3rd-grade class. The first lesson was a success, so we decided to collaborate on another, and then another. This led to co-teaching for the entire year and years to come.

The experience helped both of us, the school, and the whole district. As we worked together and our relationship grew stronger, so did my understanding of and connection to the school community. Teachers and students were more open because they trusted her, and gradually they came to trust me, too. Plus, students saw the strength of partnering because we modeled it constantly.

We strengthened each other's practice as well. As an elementary educator, I learned what students needed to know to build the foundation for their secondary science classes, while she discovered the ways 3rd-grade students could be pushed to grow and learn and how she could build on that.

But most importantly, our relationship helped us support one another to try new things. We collaborated on presentations for families, sharing what students were learning in class and how lessons could be replicated at home. We presented an online "STEM on a Shoestring" webinar for an international audience. Throughout the year, we were reflective about our practice and discussed ways to adjust our lessons. We shared books, articles, and ideas that alone we did not know.

As I grew into my role, I found more ways to build trust with teachers, including being flexible and responsive to their goals and expectations. In one situation, I was helping a teacher use an app where students could publish stories. I expected the final product to be fully

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digital: a published story on the app's website. I froze when the teacher asked me to print an anthology of the stories, with a copy for each student. I didn't have the funds for this.

As I probed and listened, I learned that the teacher and her grade-level colleagues had been publishing students' stories in printed books for years, so they assumed our collaboration would result in a physical book, too. I expressed concern that this might not be possible, but after reflection and fear of disappointing the teacher, I did a workaround: I asked our new director of technology for funding to create two hardcover books for the class and two for the school library.

When I returned to the class and said I was sorry that I had misunderstood the end goal, and then offered what I thought might be an acceptable alternative, the teacher and students were elated.

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### **MY COACHING PHILOSOPHY**

My experience as a technology specialist helped me develop my coaching philosophy and coaching techniques, which I based on the Adult Learning Theory of Andragogy (Knowles, 1984). It is designed to assist educators in the integration of technology, but it can be used in all kinds of instructional coaching. (See box on p. 29.)

Here are some ways I have helped teach technology using my coaching philosophy.

#### **Build trust.**

- I shortened the help desk's response time to 24-48 hours.
- I instituted a policy in which each ticket receives an instant response and acknowledgment of the request for help.
- I make myself visible and available by arriving early, attending meetings, and volunteering around campus.
- I co-teach and model entry-level applications that students can continue independently or with minimal assistance.

#### **Create equity.**

- I freely share my time with everyone so that everyone can move up in their levels of expertise.
- I work with all students and teachers, finding ways to adapt to all learners' needs, no matter their physical, emotional, or cognitive abilities.
- Through grants, I was able to replace outdated hardware and software so that all students have access to the same high-quality resources.
- I started after-school enrichment classes for students and workshops for teachers.

#### **Advocate for students, teachers, and families.**

- I replaced unreliable technology with reliable and secure Wi-Fi for the school building, ensured all tools functioned properly, and provided ongoing focused training to help students and staff overcome a learned hatred of technology that wasn't serving their needs.
- I advocated for middle school students to form after-school programs to teach coding to their peers.

- I spoke up for students who wanted to use Minecraft in school, thanks to students educating me about Minecraft and its benefits.

#### **Collaborate with everyone.**

- Educators and I co-authored and co-taught lessons. Sometimes I modeled lessons for them, and sometimes I was an extra hand in the classroom, even when the subject was not related to technology.
- I listened to my teachers' needs and concerns first, and then made plans with their needs in mind.
- I made it a habit to arrive early, clean up afterward, and ask how I could help again.

#### **Be humble and infuse humor.**

- Recognize that technology does not always work for everyone and be empathic to educators' challenges; virtually everyone calls for support and help at some point.
- Acknowledge that no one has all the answers, even a coach like me. I was honest with my teachers; they knew we would collaborate to find solutions.
- Research shows (Mayo Clinic, 2023) the short-term benefits

of laughter include activating and relieving stress responses and soothing tension. Both help build relations and make learning possible. I enjoy sharing personal anecdotes, jokes, cartoons, and fun videos while working with students and teachers.

#### **MAKING A MINDSET SHIFT**

One of the most important outcomes of my approach is that it has nurtured a new mindset among teachers, which manifests when teachers ask themselves, a colleague, or me, "How can technology enhance this lesson?" This mindset shift helps educators provide equal access to all students to create, iterate, learn, communicate, and collaborate, using instructional technology, instead of being passive consumers of technology.

Overcoming resistance to change to get to that point is not easy, and it takes time. But the time and effort are worth it. I'm reminded of that whenever I hear a teacher who used to say "I hate technology" say things like, "Can I borrow devices for our back-to-school night so I can share with families how we are using technology in class?" or "Can you remind me the password for Vimeo so I can show another teacher how to embed videos onto their blog?"

Those moments are windows into

teachers' growing openness to engage with technology, and that can make a real difference for students, not just now, but in their future careers and lives.

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