



How to Make Coteaching Work Virtually: Know Your People

by [Irish Farley](#) and [Shana Mutton](#)

As long-time educators, we have worked in a variety of collaborative settings using all the methods, models, and configurations. But nothing prepared us for what we are all faced with in 2020: online school. Coteaching is a powerful intervention for students, especially English language learners (Scruggs et al., 2007; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2018), so we knew we needed to figure out a way to continue our collaborative teaching even though we were scattered around the world. Since our school went online in February 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned some things that have made coteaching work.

As a Grade 5 teacher (Shana) and an English language acquisition teacher (Irish) at an international school in China, creating and implementing our online program felt like being gourmet chefs who were suddenly expected to cook over a campfire—we are experts, but we did not feel like it in this new context. Because of the quick spread of the virus and the rapid lockdown, as a school community we were given 1 day to prepare for moving everything online. We did our best to adapt, but there were missteps, days in pajamas, and occasional crying in the bathroom. However, there were also virtual dance parties, games, and gains. There was *learning*.

Now that we are starting out in a new school year—the most uncertain school year of all of our careers, we are sure—we have compiled a summary of what we found to be the most effective ways to coteach, virtually or otherwise.

Who Are These People?

Teaching and learning is a relationship between people (Gately & Gately, 2001). Within the context of online learning, this working relationship dynamic needs to be cultivated and maintained, even when the relationship has been one that has been forced together by circumstance (Sileo, 2011). To cultivate and maintain this relationship, you need to know your fellow teachers and the students you are working with. This means knowing not just how they function as a teacher or a learner, *but what their personal context is within this extraordinary global situation*.

In our particular experience, our team of four were spread across time zones and this in itself caused a level of frustration. Communication via text messaging and emails worked to a degree,

but, often, replies were slow in coming and decisions were pushed aside. It wasn't long before we realized the obvious was the required solution: A good old face-to-face (or screen-to-screen in this case) chat was needed (Gately & Gately, 2001; Vaughn et al., 1997). Once we made time for this and set it as part of our routine, it became apparent that we needed these chats not just to plan and assess, but to actually touch base and rehumanise our team.

Talking together about our homes, families, and mental wellbeing became an integral and important part of our weekly routines. There's a lot going on for everyone. Fear, stress, isolation, and impending change weigh heavily on people, and each of us responds to these things differently. Relationships require trust, vulnerability, and understanding, and coteaching—with the external stress that comes with a global pandemic—adds another layer of complexity to these relationships. To navigate this new territory, knowing and understanding the people you work with is an essential component in the success of your online learning program (Conderman et al., 2009).

It's Like a Virtual Trust-Fall

We've both attended and led team-building activities. The trust fall is arguably the riskiest of exercises: One person stands with their back to the other and has to fall straight back, trusting that their partner will catch them rather than letting them drop to the ground. To complete the exercise, you have to have a great deal of trust in the other person. Coteaching virtually can feel like this. When coteaching in person, each teacher has more autonomy, and usually there is an established flow to lessons. Online, these nuances are stripped away and more trust is needed.

When teaching teams naturally get along, coteaching is fun and easy. Not everyone is paired up with their best friend or even someone they like. If you find yourself with a partner you don't see eye-to-eye with, there are some ways to make the situation not only tolerable, but successful.

First of all, try to remember that almost every teacher has the best intentions for their students. This should be your baseline. If you can identify nothing else in common with your coteacher, at least know that you both want your students to learn. Second, communication is essential (Sileo, 2011). Initial coteaching can feel like a bad first date—it can be awkward, and you might not know what to say. It is helpful to have a set debrief time each week using a prescribed set of discussion points. With established topics, neither coteacher has to be the “confrontational” one.

An example of topics you might want to cover with your team could be:

- What went well this week
- Student who struggled this week
- Student who surprised me this week
- What I would like to see changed for next week
- Personally, this week I struggled with... (getting out of my pajamas, parenting while teaching, eating all my meals in bed, etc.)
- Personally, this week I enjoyed... (sleeping a bit later, playing a game with my family, going for a walk at lunchtime, etc.)

Share the Load and Play to Your Strengths

Doing an equal share of the work is often tricky. You want to avoid the “group project” dynamic where one person ends up doing all the work and the others just put their names on it. As we discussed previously, this is where it is important to know your people and communicate; it’s also important to know your own strengths and express them to your team. For us, we knew our strengths by identifying what we could do easily. And we found that these strengths were amplified when we were teaching remotely. Whether it was organizing online notebooks, coordinating math tasks, making videos, or fostering social-emotional support, when we divided up jobs that we were proficient at, it made work more efficient, easier, and enjoyable for the whole team.

Conclusion

We know that for almost every teacher, this is not what you signed up for. Teaching is one of the most interpersonal professions there is. Teaching is about relationships: relationships with your students *and* with your colleagues. Though COVID-19 has disrupted the flow of teaching, we can still achieve the same teaching and learning outcomes by using a different path. A few tweaks to the system, a few deep breaths, and a few more face-to-face chats with your team, and you’ll get through it. We promise.

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