

Coaching in Lockdown – The Ultimate Goal

By Tiffany Ingram, Senior Teacher and Coaching and Mentoring Leader.

Two years ago I walked into my Head's office – a green middle leader with some burgeoning ideas about student agency. I'd been reading up on coaching and goal-setting and I was sure that by educating myself further and implementing a model at our inner-London Secondary, we could really make a difference to our students – both to their wellbeing and to their potential achievement. The Head was keen and our Coaching Programme was enthusiastically given the green light and I embarked on an ILM qualification in Coaching and Mentoring.

Fast-forward to 2020 and following some bumps and barriers, coaching is securely woven into the architecture of our school. One-to-one sessions in Year 11 and KS3 peer coaching are the norm and plans for additional coaching groups have now been built into our timetable. The net is scheduled to widen to include each and every student and our young people are growing in their confidence, independence and problem-solving skills. School staff have been keen to develop their coaching competence and our team encompasses everyone Assistant Heads to NQTs and Office Managers to PAs.

Then things changed: our daily routine was turbulently disrupted and students found themselves in Lockdown with their education and pastoral care relegated to the small screen of a computer, tablet or phone. What did this mean for coaching and the face to face relationships that had been built up? Could we really expect the same response and engagement from students?

Back to the drawing board

Initially, I was hesitant as to whether an online or telephone coaching approach could work for our pupils. Would they be able to access and work the tech? Would they sit there in uncomfortable silence? Would we lose the warmth and rapport? As a school we have prioritised strong relationships within our small community and this felt very ill-fitting.

As I was considering these questions, an email from Bejal Shah dropped into my inbox. Bejal is the Programmes Director at Reach Out, a mentoring charity that runs weekly sessions across London and beyond, and whom we've had a brilliant partnership for years. She proposed an online mentoring model for mentees and within a few weeks we were up and running. Students found it accessible and engaging with sessions rooted in group work and breakaway windows for one-to-ones. After getting overwhelmingly positive feedback from mentees, I was sold.

As Year 11 had now gone on so-called 'study leave' it was also time to reallocate one-to-one coaches across Year 10 – a group with a mixed response to home learning and most

certainly in need of some goal-based structure. The coaching team met, coaches and coachees were matched. A blended coaching approach was developed in order to ensure valuable and collaborative rapports were formed between partnerships prior to our probable September return. Coaches would check in one-to-one via email before group sessions were arranged to introduce the concept of goal setting and break the ice. Crucially having this face to face, albeit slightly pixelated experience, has allowed coaches to monitor wellbeing and students to feel safe in the knowledge they have access to a friendly face whose interest lay beyond where their missing homework was.

Following this starting point, coaches were given the freedom to arrange the nature of sessions with their coachees. Although video calling is beneficial, it's frustrating if a weak internet connection drops in and out, or if privacy is an issue in a small flat – one student joined a video conference with headphones and communicated via the chat function as mum was working from home in the same room. Telephone calls and emails are being explored, and the crux of the experience seems to boil down to human contact, even if it is delivered with a digital footprint.

How can we learn from this experience?

I thought about the barriers we'd encountered on site during the development of the coaching programme – time, space, noise and so forth. Lockdown may have inadvertently presented us with an alternative prototype ready to be explored.

We know time will always be a factor when implementing additional facets of the school day – so how can we connect with people more effectively? Would continuing with a digital approach be sustainable for students? It would certainly open up a broader spectrum in terms of time. An online group session after school might be appealing for some coaches, the school is quiet and the stress of the day may have abated.

But should we stop there – does it give us further opportunities to share resources as coaches with coaching groups? Colleagues in schools across the country may find it beneficial to share best practice and work in online coaching duos or triads in order to learn from each other. Could this be an opportunity to nudge our school towards becoming a coaching hub? This original dream I'd had at the beginning of this coaching journey in the Head's office, and something I've spent lockdown contemplating how to get off the ground.

The value of coaching has been clear to us as a school as our programme has developed, open conversation is embraced and data has shown progress. Let's continue to delve into different digital and collaborative approaches and make the most out of the time we have – both now and after the apocalypse has ended.