

Bringing Teachers Together Virtually



By Richard Jones, EdD

There is nothing more meaningful to a teacher than professional learning that is just in time, collaborative, and practical. The COVID-19 school closings in the spring of 2020 made every educator feel like a beginning teacher, needing to learn how to teach virtually. The technology existed to provide online virtual conversations, but very few teachers had experience with this in actual teaching. Virtual teaching as an instructional tool seemed even more foreign for career and technical education (CTE) teachers used to working with students in shops, labs, tools, and equipment. How could “hands-on learning” be virtual? When teachers lament, they never anticipated being asked to teach virtually, and this was especially true for CTE teachers.

With the pandemic occurring near the end of the school year, CTE teachers were frustrated with closures. They had developed strong relationships with their students, particularly for seniors with whom they had worked over multiple years. They were looking forward to the students completing their program, and in many cases passing a technical assessment to earn a credential or license. These were essential benchmarks for CTE students often as important as a high school diploma. Teachers were given the opportunity to provide virtual instruction for the remaining weeks of the school year, but that seemed impractical for CTE. A virtual class might work well for a literary discussion or solving mathematics problems, but using virtual tools for automotive repair or veterinary science seemed like a significant disconnect.

This seemingly insurmountable problem led to a powerful and successful professional learning endeavor

or facilitated by the CTE Technical Assistance Center. As a result of virtual teacher collaboration effort, CTE teachers created and shared many ways and tools for students to continue their technical learning remotely. The Technical Assistance Center is operated by the not-for-profit Successful Practices Network with a contract from the New York State Education Department to provide assistance and support to CTE programs across the state. In the ten years of its existence, TAC has offered dozens of free, face-to-face professional development workshops and webinars, provided ongoing assistance to administrators and CTE leaders, and developed instructional and program planning resources. But virtual professional learning and virtual teaching were not on the radar.

During the spring school closure, CTE TAC staff addressed the challenges that CTE teachers were facing. Staff set up virtual sharing and support collaborative meetings on Zoom for teachers from across the state to come together by subject areas such as automotive, cosmetology, health science, and culinary. From April 8 to June 12, staff facilitated 75 virtual sessions using Zoom which were divided into 23 different subject areas. Grouping teachers by subject areas brought teachers together with a very common purpose that made it convenient to share the challenges of trying to bring technical discipline into a virtual learning environment. Often CTE teachers are content area singletons in their schools or career and technical centers without colleagues who are teaching the same course or program. Every teacher faced the same dilemma —there was a common need. In

all, over 2,000 teachers and administrators participated in the sharing and learning events in the spring.

The compliments from teachers acknowledged how valuable these experiences were. One teacher commented, “This was fantastic! There were more than 70 people on the call and it was awesome to hear what others were doing, how they were dealing with technology limitations, and ideas for projects. It was also amazing to get leads on teachers to whom I can reach out to.” Marisa Bossert, family and consumer teacher in Liberty Central School, shared a reflection on the impact of the sharing virtual sessions: “I wanted to express my unending gratitude....As this school year began, I found myself tutoring other teachers in my building. Usually this consisted of calming them of their fears for hybrid teaching, offering tips and tricks I learned during all of the sessions.”

Administrators were actively involved and encouraged their teachers to participate in these Zoom meetings. Representatives of the Association of CTE Administrators (ACTEA) leadership organization were actively involved as were the teacher professional organizations. Some of these meetings were very small, such as aviation, of which there are only a half dozen secondary programs across the state. Other meetings included more than 200 teachers.

Teachers were initially reticent to try virtual teaching both for their information sharing or to even think about it as a tool that they would use in their own teaching. However, soon they appreciated the opportunity to share ideas with peers from every corner of the state. Teachers shared openly in this virtual environment

their issues to deal with and problems to solve. Before this virtual effort there were limited professional learning opportunities, either virtually or in person, that brought career and technical education teachers together on a statewide basis. This virtual interaction developed strong relationships, as teachers had extended conversations. One example was the small group of aviation instructors who did not know one another but have become strong colleagues continuing to share ideas offline about their programs.

Another advantage of these virtual meetings was being able to provide instant communication around issues of complying with program requirements. Many CTE programs have specific state hour or test requirements. The active involvement of CTE Team representatives from the State Education Department provided instant communication on policy changes and exceptions. In reverse, state leaders were also able to hear directly from teachers about problems, concerns, and challenges that required a policy exception. This was a particularly positive aspect to have instant communication.

The seed of the idea of taking advantage of virtual collaboration tools for professional learning and sharing started in the work of the Technical Assistance Center within the ACTEA regional zones of the state. Michael Woods, central New York field associate for the CTE TAC, had begun to facilitate in-person regional sharing sessions for teachers in a common instructional area over the last two years. For example, a group of teachers in areas such as construction, automotive, or culinary would come together after school across a dozen county areas to share ideas and instructional techniques, and learn about industry changes and opportunities. When the pandemic kicked in, it seemed a logical step to try and continue this collaboration virtually to address many of the challenges the teachers were facing. Once these sharing and support collaborative meetings were set up, it was just as easy to do a statewide program as it was a regional program.

These virtual professional sharing sessions are not one-time events but part of an ongoing effort to provide professional learning communities statewide for groups of teachers with a common interest. The CTE TAC maintains a CTE PLC for each content area on a Google drive with shared files of teaching ideas for each instructional area. This was also a place that the materials from all of the sharing sessions were filed so that every teacher has access to that information. The teachers were encouraged to share artifacts of their teaching ideas and solutions with others through this virtual professional learning community.

Michael Woods and CTE TAC assistant director Dr. Connie Spohn facilitated each of these meetings through a very hectic spring. They were very impressed with the dedication of teachers who came together in a very stressful time with a willingness to share problems, share ideas, and even share failures to work together to improve the collective profession. Online professional learning, if forced upon teachers in a different time and a different situation, would have been looked at as something useful but unimportant right now. However, the challenges the teachers faced in 2020 produced an eagerness to learn new ideas. Virtual collaboration was an opportunity to create solutions that would help them work with their students to try to finish their program.

These meetings were so successful and so appreciated by the teachers that the Technical Assistance Center has made plans to continue these through the school year. The successful experience has created a unique, ongoing professional learning environment. The Technical Assistance Center provided a back-to-school set of sessions for each of the 23 subject areas and plans to repeat these sessions through the school year every four to six weeks. Participants in the meetings in the spring were able to express very clearly the needs that they had in skills around teaching virtually. As a result of the interest in learning more about individual virtual platforms their schools were us-

ing, the Technical Assistance Center provided additional in-depth online professional development on the three most commonly used virtual tools for over a thousand teachers in the weeks prior to the start of school.

This successful professional learning effort has energized the CTE teacher and administrator professional organizations to commit to expanded online learning that is more convenient for teachers as it is available online anytime they need it. The New York State Association of CTE, working with the national organization, is introducing the New York online learning portal NY CTE Learn, with dozens of courses and lessons for CTE educators.

Looking back over the last several months, the virtual collaboration was a very successful effort. However, what is most gratifying is the thousands of educators who came together developing relationships with an interest of continuing their professional growth. This will only enhance the professions and better serve students in their career development.

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