Literacy Coaching: Engaging and Learning with Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Literacy coaching, a unique and generative opportunity to engage with and learn from teachers, is currently viewed as a powerful intervention to increase student literacy achievement. This article focuses on eight principles for responsive literacy coaching. To build trusting relationships, coaches engage with teachers in literacy events, confirm teachers' strengths, find accessible entry points, examine students work, and collaboratively problem solve. Working side by side with teachers in classrooms, literacy coaches notice, name, and model literacy instructional practices.

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Cheryl Dozier, a former elementary teacher, is an assistant professor in the Department of Reading at the University at Albany where she teaches literacy courses. She presents nationally and internationally on teacher preparation and has written two books, *Critical Literacy and Critical Teaching: Tools for Preparing Responsive Teachers* (Teachers College Press) with Peter Johnston and Rebecca Rogers and *Responsive Literacy Coaching* (Stenhouse).

It is an exciting time in literacy education as literacy coaching is heralded as a "powerful intervention with great potential" to increase student literacy achievement (IRA, 2004). National organizations, literacy leaders, policy makers, and classroom teachers are all contributing to identify, shape, and design literacy coaching positions in schools. The International Reading Association has outlined coaching criteria (IRA, 2004) and created an online support for coaches (www.literacycoachingonline.org) in a joint partnership with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Coaching books written by a variety of educators flood the market. Conferences abound with preliminary research findings in addition to sessions on the "how-tos" of and for coaching. Despite a movement in our current educational and political environment that attempts to simplify the complexities of teaching and learning through scripted programs (Allington, 2002), literacy coaches can help teachers understand and analyze the complexities of teaching and student learning (Dozier, 2006). Literacy coaches support teachers as they develop their professionalism.

Literacy coaches are expected to navigate multiple spaces, stakeholders, and responsibilities. While there are competing claims for a coach's time and resources, a coach's primary responsibility is working with teachers (Toll, 2005). Literacy coaches are advocates for teachers, not evaluators (Allen, 2005). As such, a key feature of literacy coaching is developing relationships with teachers. Some relationships begin smoothly, some have more cautious starts, and others can be contentious initially– until a coach

finds a teacher's entry point (and sometimes relationship building takes much longer than we might wish). As relationships evolve, coaches seek to understand teachers' ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) to nurture teachers' continued development. As Natalie Goldberg (2001) offers, "Understanding engenders care" (p.125). Care is at the heart of literacy coaching.

As an educator for over twenty-five years, I view each coaching moment as an opportunity to learn. Some lessons are learned easily, some less so. While it can be easier to recognize our successes, harder coaching work involves thinking through and learning from challenges. Coaching challenges provide impetus for new insights and new learning. For me, literacy coaching involves inquiring, learning together, rethinking, wondering, and exploring multiple instructional possibilities (Dozier, 2006). As a literacy coach, I embrace Brian Cambourne's (1995) co-learner model. While I have areas of expertise, I do not position myself as "the expert." As I develop relationships with teachers, I seek, first, to be responsive to teachers' strengths, interests, and needs. In this article, I share eight principles that guide my responsive literacy coaching.

Engage in Literacy Events ~ Learner to Learner

As a coach, when I engage with teachers, learner to learner, reader to reader, writer to writer, I set the foundation for a trusting relationship to begin. As Seymour Sarason (1993) notes, when teachers are nurtured as learners, they, in turn, nurture the learners in their classrooms. For this to occur, I offer a range of ways for teachers to engage in literacy events.

One literacy event is sharing literacy artifacts. Conversations around artifacts help me come to know what resonates for teachers (at a particular moment) and what moves and interests them. Through literacy artifacts, we learn from and with one another. Recently, several second grade teachers brought mentor texts they used to introduce leads, endings, or character development. Others shared books they were using for critical literacy. Lora introduced *Dumpster Diver* by Janet Wong (2007), a book she used in her class to examine issues of recycling and conservation. During their book discussion, Lora learned that several of the children in her classroom went dumpster diving on weekends. On this same day, all of the first grade teachers in the building chose to bring examples of student writing – poetry, How to Books, personal narratives. They shared great lines from their students' writing, a poem from a reluctant writer who found her voice as a poet, and excerpts from *How to Brush Your Horse* and *How to Pull a Tooth*. When teachers share artifacts, I start from teachers' known interests, and strengths. Right away, I can begin to find a teacher's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The artifacts teachers choose and their reflections offer insights into how teachers understand literacy, literacy teaching, and their learners.

To explore one aspect of critical literacy, I asked teachers to read a magazine article from a range of perspectives. The *Newsweek* article (Conant & Wingert, 2007) I chose featured Andrew Speaker, a 33 year old lawyer who flew to Europe for his wedding and caused an uproar when he continued to travel, even though he knew he had a highly contagious form of tuberculosis. Each teacher read and discussed the article from

a different perspective – from the perspective of Andrew Speaker; from the perspective of a passenger sitting next to Andrew; from the perspective of a CDC official; and from the perspective of local, national, and international agencies. After these small group discussions, each teacher then examined the text for compelling and biased language choices. Together, we questioned whose voices were heard and whose voices were excluded. The "passengers sitting next to Andrew" noticed (much to their chagrin!) that their voices were not once included in the article. We then engaged in a process conversation intended to unpack this experience (Nichols, 2007) with the following questions: What worked? What did not work? What do you wish had happened? What does this activity cause you to think about in terms of your learners? As teachers talked, they noticed and identified the range of ways they engaged in the literacy event. Some teachers underlined as they read, a few highlighted extensively, some wrote comments and questions in the margins, others used post-it notes to gather their thoughts. Some read quickly, others read slowly. We then turned our attention to how this literacy event could transfer to classrooms.

Sometimes the literacy events I engage in with teachers (i.e. book introductions, writing during professional development sessions) transfer directly to classrooms. Other times, teachers discuss possible modifications for use in classrooms. Coaching relationships are enriched when we learn from and with teachers.

Continue to Develop Professionally

Literacy has never been a neutral endeavor. All of our choices as teachers are value laden. As a literacy coach, I read extensively and attend conferences to broaden my professional and content knowledge of literacy and instructional practices as a way to question and challenge my current understandings and practices. As such, I expect moments of intellectual unrest (Cambourne, 1995) as I continue to learn. Through these experiences, I become a resource for examining and recommending materials, assessments, and instructional practices.

I routinely share articles, books and resources with teachers that I think they will find informative, interesting, and engaging. Just as I want teachers to support and attend to the range of learners in their classrooms, I, too, tailor book and article choices for teachers. For each teacher, I work to choose books that will support their interests and address questions they are raising about literacy and literacy instruction. As teachers rethink instructional practices, they have particular needs at particular times. In one building, as teachers moved to a writer's workshop model, some wanted resources to support their writing conferences (Anderson, 2000), others asked for a framework for writing instruction (Calkins, 2003), while others first wanted a broader understanding of writing (Routman, 2005). I draw from a range of articles and resources to meet individual needs and interests.

To extend my pedagogical knowledge, I continue to spend time in classrooms to try new instructional practices. Since my own teaching experiences were primarily in kindergarten though third grade, I asked upper elementary colleagues if I could spend time with them to learn about the learners in their classrooms. In this way, when I

recommend an instructional practice, I can speak from experience. I routinely share modifications implemented, logistics navigated, and pitfalls overcome.

As a coach, it is also my responsibility to understand how schools operate. I become familiar with literacy initiatives already in place, learn from successes and failures of past initiatives, and seek to discover if current initiatives conflict with one another ideologically. Periodically, it is helpful to step back and analyze the landscape to see where teachers are, what has been required in the past, and then analyze how to provide support at this time. After several years of rethinking and revising writing instruction, I worked with teachers in one K-2 building to create a *Writing Instruction Timeline* to analyze writing instruction across the three grade levels. Teachers easily talked and questioned one another about genres covered, how instruction aligned with district assessments, and their increased confidence as writing teachers. As we constructed the timeline, the teachers continued to adjust, extend, and refine their visions for writing instruction.

Find Strengths and Entry Points for Each Teacher

When coaches change the discourse to strengths first, we support teachers to look at students from a lens of strengths. It can be easier to see or focus on what is not going well, to dwell on difficulties. Beginning each professional development session with celebrations of teaching and student learning changes the discourse. Recently, Rose celebrated students' risk-taking and voice as writers. Nancy noted how readily her kindergarteners chose topics during writing time. Julie commented on how focused her second graders were as they searched the Internet during inquiry projects. And, several teachers described their increased comfort level and confidence for teaching writing. By focusing on strengths first, we can avoid the trap of deficit driven theorizing (Dozier, 2006). Focusing on strengths also supports our relationship building.

Change requires risk-taking. I celebrate steps teachers take, and are willing to take. In Louis Sachar's book *Small Steps* (the sequel to *Holes*), Armpit learns, "The secret was to take small steps and just keep moving forward" (2006, p.4). My first step as a coach involves finding each teacher's entry point. Entry points for change have included: providing more detailed and focused book introductions, introducing a range of genres during read alouds, using mentor texts during writer's workshop, offering a range of paper choices for writer's workshop, and analyzing language choices and instructional conversations to help students become more strategic readers.

When several middle school teachers shared, "Students love reading. They are readers. They are critical readers. They are visualizing. They are motivated. They are no longer afraid of longer texts. But, students dread writing and I dread writing," I wanted to build from their strengths as readers and teachers of reading. These teachers were avid readers, passionate about reading, and deeply engaged in reading instruction. To transfer their knowledge and passion for reading to writing and writing instruction, we wrote together, noticed when we read like writers, and selected mentor texts teachers loved from their wide reading to use during writing instruction. Through this process, teachers gained confidence as writing teachers and expanded writing instruction. As a literacy

coach, it is important for me to remember that some teachers will toe in, some will dive in, and some will observe *other* teachers until they decide instructional changes are worthy.

Work Collaboratively ~Problem Pose and Problem Solve

Collaboration is generative. We extend our understandings and learn together as we teach together. When I teach side by side with teachers, I can work with and come to know their students on a particular issue that is of importance to the teacher. This collaboration continues to build the trusting relationships we are working to develop. I begin side by side teaching noting, "And, if this does not work for us, we will come up with five more ideas to try." Liesl, a fourth grade teacher, was just beginning to confer one on one with writers in her classroom. As we sat side by side and conferred with Stan, a student in her classroom, about including more details for his readers, she was excited when he shouted, "Oh, *now* I get it. No one would understand this part." Our side by side conferring gave her confidence that she was on a productive path.

As a coach, I routinely conduct and analyze assessments side by side with teachers. Together, we look for places where we are consistent and talk through discrepancies. Our side by side analysis often gives teachers confidence in their analysis. It also opens the door for teachers to ask questions and use colleagues as resources. Together, we raise issues and question practices. We engage in focused conversations instead of becoming defensive. Our collaboration leads to communities of inquiry and has led to changes on assessment questions, formats, and actual tests used. As we negotiate, challenge, and question one another, we create stronger, more focused assessments to support student achievement. This collaborative work encourages and promotes problem posing and problem solving.

Through observations and analysis of how children navigate assessments, we better understand the children as learners. This is why I do not complete assessments and then report results to teachers. If I become the sole administrator of assessments, independent of classroom teachers, teachers then lose valuable information on how children process texts and navigate assessments. I believe that when coaches are the sole administrators of testing or assessing, it sends a dangerous message to teachers and students that testing or assessing are somehow beyond the responsibility of the classroom.

Ground Conversations in the Work of Children

To consider how children "take up" a range of genres, activities, and lessons, I invite teachers to ground conversations in children's work. Using children's work, together we question, when were children most engaged? Least engaged? What excited them, motivated them? To analyze Running Records and praise points or teaching points, I ask teachers to use actual Running Records for the conversations. Looking across Running Records (Clay, 2000) we examine the types of prompts used and what strategies children are using (or not). This analysis helps us notice when children re-read, when and where they self-correct, what strategies they privilege.

In one building, we analyzed the written responses children completed after reading. First, we looked across the range of responses. Through our discussion, we decided to include a broader range of written responses. We also had a valuable conversation about how much scaffolding students needed when they responded to texts. As we analyzed writing samples, and talked about writing instruction, we gathered ideas from one another. We identified voice in writing, students' attempts at using dialogue, and interesting leads. For conversations about genre, we noticed where children took risks and engaged with the conventions of the genre. Our instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) around children's work challenged us to envision multiple possibilities.

Notice and Name Instructional Practices

Noticing and naming (Johnston, 2004) involves an explicitness, an intentionality, and an opportunity for teachers and children to articulate developing understandings (Dozier& Rutten, 2005/2006). When I am working with teachers, I name the practices I engage in with them. As Natalie Goldberg (1986/2005) advises, "Be specific…Give things the dignity of their names" (p.77). When I ask teachers to work in pairs, I articulate the purpose for the practice. "Notice how I am asking you to work in pairs. In this way, everyone has a voice." or "I am going to provide a more detailed book introduction to Kari because I want to help him become comfortable with the author's language." This explicitness operates on two levels. It names the practice, and it names the purpose behind the practice.

The specificity of naming craft features, literate processes and strategies supports the child's continued literacy development. In classrooms, I name literate behaviors for children. After a Running Record, I might say, "Let's look at your self-correction on page 6, how did you know to do that?" or "You read this page so fluently, I could hear Mrs. North telling Marvin and Casey to be quiet." While conferring with Taurian, I said, "Your lead made me want to know more about your Grandpa." As we model naming for students, they, in turn, take the lead and begin to name their practices. Noticing and naming (Johnston, 2004) encourages a shared language.

Take a Listening Tour

When I first begin to work with teachers, I take a listening tour. A listening tour involves visiting classrooms to listen and to observe literacy practices. During these visits, I connect with teachers and children and immerse myself in instructional practices and classroom contexts. I gain a sense of teachers' literacy instruction and how children engage –what literacy instruction looks, sounds, and feels like, in classrooms and in the school. On listening tours, I ask teachers if I can take notes – solely for them. These notes include scribing conversations along with student responses. The notes help ground conversations in language choices to analyze how children respond and engage during conversations. Analyzing our language helps us become more astute observers. I have learned to be careful and to offer note taking as a possibility. Although it was not my

intent, in one building, a teacher felt the note-taking was evaluative. Other teachers welcomed the feedback from "another set of eyes."

I draw from these observations and noticings to illustrate points when I am working with small groups of teachers or entire buildings. These conversations build community around instructional practices when teachers share and name what is happening in their classrooms. I am sure to first gain permission before I ask teachers to share, " Mary, could you talk about the ways you use family journals with your class?" "Caryn, will you share your approach to Status of the Class (Atwell, 1998) with us?" "Lora, can you talk about the ways your second graders do partner shares?" "Melanie, will you tell everyone about your *Great Leads* bulletin board that includes both published authors and classroom writers? When teachers hear about instructional practices in other classrooms, they can draw from each other as resources.

As part of the listening tour, I also want to learn what materials and resources are available, and needed, for literacy instruction. To create book rooms filled with leveled readers, mentor texts, books on tape, professional resources, together we question: What books do you love? What books do your students love? Where are gaps in your book rooms? Are there a range of culturally responsive texts? Is there a balance of fiction, non-fiction? What else do you need? Over time, we have become more strategic about purchasing materials. I become nervous when books are ordered without conversations or are ordered in bulk. We want to put our students' needs and interests at the heart of the book room.

Advocate

As a coach, I advocate for strong learning communities, continued professional development, collaboration, and a thoughtful examination of literacy practices. I advocate for purposeful change. I advocate for teachers to develop as professional decision makers and to use their voices as literacy teachers. I also support teachers to articulate their needs to administrators. In one building, first grade teachers wanted sustained time each morning for literacy instruction. After several discussions, we jointly met with the principal to address this issue. Together, we looked over the building schedule to see how this proposed change would impact other classes. In doing so, we recognized the complexity of "specials" schedules – and fifth grade band schedules. In talking through the constraints, we recognized that while we could not schedule an extended block of instructional time for five mornings, we could – and did –schedule it for three mornings.

Concluding Thoughts

Literacy coaching is a unique and generative opportunity to engage with teachers. To understand and analyze the complexities of teaching and student learning, coaches first meet teachers where they are. These entry points serve as a foundation for coaching relationships to evolve. Coaches and teachers collaborate to problem solve and create inquiry communities. In these communities, we notice and name strengths and engagement – of teachers and students. In turn, our teaching becomes more refined,

deliberate, and purposeful. When we listen and notice, we learn. Every day brings new opportunities and challenges to learn from and with teachers.

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