

Teaching Better, Together: Literacy Coaching as Collaborative Professional Development

In a tribute to Dean Smith, his University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill basketball coach, Michael Jordan described Smith as not only a coach who led him to a national championship and a legendary NBA career, but also a second father who made him a better professional and a better person (Cindy Boren, *Washington Post*, February 8, 2015). While Jordan and Smith were exceptional in the history of their sport, it is Jordan's memory of a coach—and how that relationship pushed him to achieve more than he thought he could—that many of us share. No matter how much we practiced, we never became a Michael Jordan; but we became better for it, and we remember that coach and what he or she inspired within us.

In schools, literacy coaching takes its name and goal from the world of sports, with the idea that if face-to-face, in-service professional development can help practitioners thoughtfully adapt to ever-changing classroom and curricular contexts, then students' achievement will likewise improve (Morrow, Casey, and Haworth 2003). While the concept of literacy coaching is still somewhat new in the literature for English language teaching (ELT), we believe that literacy coaches can serve as transformational agents of ongoing ELT professional learning and community building to support teachers seeking to do better. Better teachers make for better students—and coaches are there to inspire.

In this article, we draw from our combined experiences as teacher educators in very different parts of the world to describe

the stance literacy coaching represents for ELT contexts. We begin by defining how literacy coaching is portrayed in the research literature. We continue with a model of four broad coaching roles and follow with a series of possible formats for sharing teaching. Finally, advocating the generative dimensions of reflective practice with other professionals, we encourage pre- and in-service teachers and teacher-leaders to consider literacy coaching's potential to create spaces for professional development. Our intent is to provide readers with a starting point for considering literacy coaching as a viable model for sustainable collaborative teacher development in ELT settings.

WHAT IS A LITERACY COACH?

For many years, specialists in schools have provided guidance and addressed students'

diverse literacy needs. However, the concept of *coaching* as a form of in-service professional development is relatively new and is still evolving.

By way of a definition, literacy coaching seeks to support reading instruction by offering regular, reliable, and appropriate professional development to instructors (Bean 2004). The literacy coach has become a more common and integral part of a school's literacy team, assisting and mentoring teachers as they work to improve their instructional practices (Toll 2007).

Much of the early research on literacy coaching focused on identifying the roles and duties that coaches fulfilled (Deussen et al. 2007; Walpole and Blamey 2008) and how they spent their time (Scott, Cortina, and Carlisle 2012). The findings from these early studies showed that the roles and responsibilities for literacy coaches varied widely and were often defined by the building administrator (Hathaway and Risko 2007; Mraz, Algozzine, and Watson 2008). In an effort to bring clarity and consistency to the role, the International Literacy Association, formerly the International Reading Association (IRA), outlines standards for the role of the literacy coach across six areas: (1) foundational knowledge; (2) curriculum and instruction; (3) assessment and evaluation; (4) diversity; (5) professional learning; and (6) leadership (IRA, 2010, 2).

While these standards have brought a new level of clarity to the role, literacy coaching can be fraught with highly emotional issues of identity and power because of the administrative underpinnings of the role and the unresolved question of what makes teaching great (Hunt and Handsfield 2013; Stephens et al. 2011). Even the title of the

role continues to see variations such as “instructional coach,” “literacy facilitator,” and “academic coach.” Therefore, responsive literacy coaching requires that literacy coaches have mixed roles of technician, service provider, supervisor, professional developer, and “fresh alternative” as they mediate, direct, and collaborate with teachers (Toll 2007, 13). Research shows that coaches promote changes in classroom practice when they thoroughly understand adult learners (i.e., their teacher colleagues), successful coaching methods, beneficial literacy instructional pedagogy, and their roles and duties (IRA 2004; Toll 2005).

ROLES AND LITERACY COACHING

The simultaneous strength and weakness of literacy coaching is the ambiguity of what a literacy coach is and who can become one. Although literacy coaching has become increasingly common in U.S. elementary school contexts, what literacy coaches do and how they accomplish those responsibilities are highly localized issues. In many cases, they are negotiated between individual literacy coaches and local administrators and teachers. In the United States, literacy coaching emerged from consecutive waves of educational reform that linked teacher evaluation to students' test scores in math and reading. Literacy coaching was, therefore, conceptualized as a purposeful, strategic, and human intervention for schools failing to achieve the adequate yearly progress as outlined by federal and state mandates. We emphasize that literacy coaches were not intended to fulfill a role as teacher evaluators. Rather, they were initially seen as a direct line of support for teachers and institutions struggling to raise student achievement on standardized tests.

**The simultaneous strength and weakness of
literacy coaching is the ambiguity of
what a literacy coach is and who can become one.**

Effective coaches need to possess extensive knowledge of literacy pedagogy as well as knowledge of how to apply theoretical knowledge to instructional practice.

With time, however, literacy coaches have more often than not taken on administrative duties. Such duties include small- and large-scale data analysis of student literacy achievement and the development of focused interventions for individual teachers, grade levels, institutions, or a combination of all of these. In some cases, because of their familiarity with student achievement data, literacy coaches do provide a level of teacher evaluation. While advocates for literacy coaches argue that an evaluative role diminishes the potential collaboration coaches might achieve with teachers, many literacy coaches find themselves somewhere in between mentor and administrator.

Despite what may seem like a daunting challenge in defining the roles of literacy coaches, we believe teachers, teacher educators, and language program administrators have the most to gain if the discussion focuses on initiatives that mainly serve to promote instructional competence, improved learning outcomes, and professional community building. Effective literacy coaching:

- involves collaborative dialogue for teachers at all levels of knowledge and experience;
- is characterized by data-oriented student and teacher learning;
- is a form of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that increases teacher capacity to meet students' needs;
- involves classroom observations that are cyclical and that build knowledge over time; and
- is supportive rather than evaluative. (Shanklin 2006, 1–2)

Successful literacy coaching creates the conditions under which teachers are likely to

grow professionally. They can enhance their instructional practice, increase their levels of motivation and self-confidence, and join a reflective and mutually supporting community of ELT professionals. To succeed, literacy coaches must have clearly defined roles, extensive support, and an existing rapport among teachers—or the possibility of creating such rapport. The key stakeholders—from teachers to literacy coaches to teacher educators and language-program administrators—must be in agreement and aware of the short- and long-term goals of a literacy-coaching initiative; they must also be aware of their individual and shared responsibilities in ensuring its success. Such goals might include, for example, introducing an evidence-based instructional macrostrategy across a grade or language level, or focused collaboration on a specific target such as building on students' prior learning (Salas and Mercado 2010).

One professional-development model, which was implemented with early literacy coaches over a four-year period, suggests four broad coaching roles: Content Expert; Promoter of Reflective Instruction; Professional-Development Facilitator; and Builder of a Schoolwide Learning Community (Mraz, Algozzine, and Kissel 2009). The following sections describe these four roles and offer suggestions on how a literacy coach working with English-language teachers can address each of them.

Coach as Content Expert

Effective coaches need to possess extensive knowledge of literacy pedagogy as well as knowledge of how to apply theoretical knowledge to instructional practice. When applying this knowledge to mentor teachers, coaches “develop classroom management routines, select materials, and implement literacy programs” (Mraz et al. 2011, 178). In fulfilling their duties, literacy coaches

“help teachers prepare engaging instructional strategies; help monitor these strategies during implementation; and, when needed, adjust instruction based on the needs of their students” (Mraz et al. 2011, 178). When the literacy coach imparts useful resources and guidance, as opposed to evaluation, a more trusting and collaborative association between the coach and the teacher materializes that leads to productive instructional methods that benefit the students (Knight 2009; L’Allier, Elish-Piper, and Bean 2010). For example, in the role of content expert, a coach might assist a teacher with brainstorming ideas for interactive readings “and differentiated instruction for small groups” (Blamey, Albert, and Dorrell 2008, 3).

Coach as Promoter of Reflective Instruction

Literacy coaches help instructors “in assessing the needs of students, reflecting on the effectiveness of their instructional practices, and refining those practices so the diverse learning needs of students can be met” (Mraz et al. 2011, 178). To accomplish this, teachers need to be familiar with different assessment tools, know how to develop and administer the assessments, understand what the assessments measure, and use assessment data to improve instruction (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). In this case, a literacy coach can promote reflective instruction by holding in-service sessions to support teachers collaborating on the use of assessment data to refine instruction. Formal meetings or workshops offering opportunities for questions and feedback about data-based instruction also support teachers. Additionally, informal communication tools, such as online discussions, small-group workshops with supportive follow-up, and coach–teacher conferences, are useful to foster reflective instruction (Mraz et al. 2011).

Coach as Professional-Development Facilitator

“Literacy coaches can provide ongoing, teacher centered, embedded professional development in a classroom environment” (Mraz et al. 2011, 179). Such professional development can occur in traditional large-group settings or when a coach interacts with small groups of teachers or individual teachers. Coaches can help

teachers put theory into practice by modeling and co-teaching and by observing and offering feedback. Coach–teacher dialogues “[allow] for focused conversations on strengths, areas of improvement, goal setting, and reflection” (Mraz et al. 2011, 180). Listening to teachers and involving them as valued members of a collective conversation is essential for establishing trust between the coach and the teacher and meeting common goals that will improve student learning.

Coach as Builder of a Schoolwide Learning Community

By becoming instructional leaders, literacy coaches play a key role in creating and executing a “vision for instruction across the content areas” (Mraz et al. 2011, 180). To accomplish this, coaches must work with instructors, administrators, and other community members to build relationships and establish goals. In this regard, open, candid, and constructive communication is a critical aspect to create an environment of mutual respect (Paramore 2007). As leaders, literacy coaches should continually monitor literacy initiatives while seeking and using feedback from teachers, administrators, and other community constituents in order to remain responsive to their professional needs as they relate to instruction and student achievement. A schoolwide literacy assembly is one example of an event that allows all members of the school community to connect with and contribute to a shared experience. This type of community event allows all school members to model the value of reading and writing, build students’ motivation for reading, and remind all involved of their shared mission of literacy teaching and learning (Mraz, Algozzine, and Kissel 2009).

OPENING DOORS, ONE CLASSROOM AT A TIME

Literacy coaching often has a long-lasting influence on teacher practice, especially for those who are beginning their careers. Therefore, stakeholders should come together to articulate and periodically review a common vision as to what literacy coaching should achieve as well as the specific roles and

responsibilities they will be expected to carry out. The goal is to make certain there is a clearly defined connection between a literacy-coaching program and teaching needs, beliefs, and practice.

Moreover, literacy coaches and teachers should come together to create and sustain a professional learning community, with coaches working purposefully to “establish trust, open lines of communication, and cultivate an atmosphere of collegial collaboration and problem solving with their teachers” (Casey 2006, 5). To succeed, literacy coaches must have an extensive knowledge of praxis in joint professional development, especially those strategies and techniques that facilitate non-evaluative, ongoing teacher support in the form of “sharing teaching.”

Sharing teaching brings teachers together in an inquiry stance to think together about the work they do every day and how it might be better. It is a rejection of the traditional mentality of teaching with doors closed and in isolation, and it might begin with a formative observation that invites professionals to teach publically and talk about their teaching. According to Casey (2006, 97), “Showing people what instruction looks like and sounds like is vital to successful coaching.” Literacy coaches should demonstrate classes that clearly address the needs of observing teachers and have students who are very much like those the coaches’ mentees normally encounter.

Following are a few possible formats for sharing teaching.

Master teacher observation

The teacher and coach observe a master teacher together. They discuss the classroom environment and activities. The observation

and discussion allow for critical conversations about what is happening in both the novice teacher’s and master teacher’s classes.

Formative observations

Coaches face the challenge of building trust with teachers. Although the literacy coach is not functioning as an evaluator, it is difficult to shed the evaluative feel of any formal observation. When conducting formative observations, some coaches may choose to use an observation rubric similar to that used during a summative evaluation. Others may rely on field notes and reflections of the time spent in the teacher’s classroom.

Teacher-coach conferences

Real coaching often takes place when coaches talk with teachers. Teacher-coach conferences help teachers reflect on current practices, engage in genuine inquiry, and maintain a focus on student learning (Blachowicz, Obrochta, and Fogelberg 2005). During teacher-coach conferences, it is critical for the coach to maintain an atmosphere of collegiality and support. The phases that guide the conference include (1) asking questions (lesson questions, student-driven questions, broad questions); (2) explaining what the coach observes (state observations objectively, without judgment); (3) offering one coaching point; (4) brainstorming the next steps to address student needs; and (5) suggesting links to professional literature that may be of interest or value to the teacher (Mraz, Algozzine, and Kissel 2009).

Attending professional development as a team

A coach can attend the same professional-development or teacher-training session as the novice teacher. They receive identical information on how to apply lessons learned to the classroom, which they use to discuss implementing practices that will benefit teaching and learning. The brainstorming

Literacy coaching often has a long-lasting influence on teacher practice, especially for those who are beginning their careers.

partnership between coach and teacher is extremely constructive for developing new ideas or strategies to use in the classroom.

Literacy groups

A mutual support group of up to 15 teachers meets once a month to discuss issues and challenges that arise in the classroom, such as a research topic of the month or other academic concerns. However, rather than having an academic supervisor act as a facilitator, the group is led by a literacy coach well versed in the needs of the teachers.

RESPONDING TO INSTRUCTION

Collaborative reflection within a community of supportive professionals requires opportunities for sharing instruction and repertoires for responding to instruction. Responses can consist of descriptive, analytic, or observational feedback.

A coach's descriptive feedback to teaching might simply capture what the coach saw happen in a lesson and the parts of a lesson or elements of instruction that were particularly generative. Descriptive feedback is especially useful in the early stages of a cooperative relationship when teachers are in the process of building trust and patterns of positive communication. Moreover, descriptive feedback creates a mirror or soundtrack of a lesson for a teacher—an additional set of ears and eyes that reports on what a colleague witnessed during a unit of instructional time.

In contrast to descriptive feedback, analytic feedback is more focused—often engaging teachers in joint reflection about structural issues surrounding lesson planning and delivery. An analytic approach to teacher observation might take the form of a colleague creating a skeletal outline of a segment of

instruction—mapping out, for example, teacher–student and student–student interactions, transitions between instructional periods, the types and frequency of comprehension checks, and other observable elements of instruction.

Observational feedback is another response format that creates the opportunity for a teacher to hear what a colleague saw and felt at a more personal level—something like, “When you made the connection between X and Y, I thought to myself ‘Wow!’” or “I was confused about X until the students formed small groups and began producing examples of X.” Descriptive, analytic, and observational feedback are all possible formats that support sharing teaching. Each is aligned with collaborative reflective teaching that literacy coaching represents.

CONCLUSION: SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

If many teachers are reluctant to open their classrooms to the public reflection that observation and feedback might generate, we believe that this is at least in part because these sorts of visits are often seen as evaluative. For these reasons, literacy coaches need to negotiate and renegotiate with administrators, teachers, and themselves what they do and do not do. As we have explained, the role of a literacy coach can be multifaceted. Recent standards established by professional organizations, such as the International Literacy Association, have brought some clarity to the role; however, variations in the tasks coaches are expected to perform still exist. Although the main objective of coaching is to develop teachers' knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to expand students' literacy (Hathaway, Martin, and Mraz 2016), coaches often find

**Literacy coaches need to negotiate and renegotiate
with administrators, teachers, and themselves
what they do and do not do.**

themselves engaged in noninstructional clerical or administrative duties (Deussen et al. 2007). Additionally, teachers, coaches, and administrators often hold varying perceptions and expectations of the coaching role.

To bring clarity to the coaching role, Mraz, Algozzine, and Kissel (2009) offer the following suggestions for organizing and approaching a coaching position:

- **Before the school year begins:** Meet with the school administrator to establish initial expectations for the coach and discuss items such as goals, scheduling, resources, current literacy programs, and assessment procedures. Gather information on the school and the district: population, challenges, and current initiatives, as well as professional resources such as instructional strategies, assessments, web-based resources, committee assignments, and courses of study.
- **At the beginning of the school year:** Introduce yourself to teachers in small-group or individual settings and invite feedback about the school's literacy needs and the teachers' professional goals. Secure office supplies and establish organizational tools such as color-coded folders and three-ring binders, as well as a recordkeeping system to schedule and document teacher-coach meetings, observations, assessments, professional-development presentations, and other meetings; develop a system to manage the resources that will be shared with instructors.
- **Throughout the school year:** Use appropriate literacy-coaching techniques, including co-planning and teaching and modeling; schedule formative observations, teacher-coach conferences, and professional-development sessions; and engage in professional development to enhance your content knowledge and coaching ability.

Teachers working with literacy coaches need also to articulate what they might

bring to the literacy coach-teacher working relationship. Beyond simply understanding what professionals think and why they think the way they do, we argue for the concerted reflective practice that literacy coaching represents—a space wherein colleagues might not only articulate their individual visions and personal commitments to teaching and learning, but also challenge existing belief systems and practices.

For this reason, coaching is hard work—whether on the sports field or within a school. In institutions, we recognize that hierarchical conceptualizations of coaching are especially difficult to overcome where a vertical tradition of teacher supervision exists in the minds of literacy coaches, teachers, and administrators. Advocating more horizontal, collaborative approaches to teacher support, we encourage educators to try literacy coaching step by step—negotiating the roles of coaches and the teachers and administrators with whom they collaborate and developing a supportive position that might create and sustain spaces wherein collaboration and teaching can grow. In other words, perhaps part of the challenge of shifting from reflective practice as an isolated activity to a literacy-coaching model is that too many of us have had too little experience with working together. Even more, we hope that such encounters might lead to deeper reflection about the work we do and to the establishment of a collaborative community that will enhance student outcomes—and that is a win-win atmosphere for teaching and learning.

REFERENCES

- Bean, R. M. 2004. Promoting effective literacy instruction: The challenge for literacy coaches. *The California Reader* 37 (3): 58–63.
- Blachowicz, C., C. Obrochta, and E. Fogelberg. 2005. Literacy coaching for change. *Educational Leadership* 62 (6): 55–58.
- Blamey, K., L. Albert, and B. Dorrell. 2008. *C is for coach: What is it like to be an early childhood literacy coach?* Urbana, IL: Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Casey, K. 2006. *Literacy coaching: The essentials*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Darling-Hammond, L., R. C. Wei, A. Andree, N. Richardson, and S. Orphanos. 2009. *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council.
- Deussen, T., T. Coskie, L. Robinson, and E. Autio. 2007. "Coach" can mean many things: Five categories of literacy coaches in Reading First. *REL Northwest* 5. Washington, DC: Department of Education.
- Hathaway, J. I., C. S. Martin, and M. Mraz. 2016. Revisiting the roles of literacy coaches: Does reality match research? *Reading Psychology* 37 (2): 230–256.
- Hathaway, J. I., and V. J. Risko. 2007. Reading specialists as professional development leaders: Contextualizing school change. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Hunt, C. S., and L. J. Handsfield. 2013. The emotional landscapes of literacy coaching: Issues of identity, power, and positioning. *Journal of Literacy Research* 45 (1): 47–86.
- International Reading Association. 2004. *The role and qualifications of the reading coach in the United States*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- . 2010. *Standards for reading professionals—Revised 2010*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Knight, J. 2009. Coaching. *Journal of Staff Development* 30 (1): 18–22.
- L’Allier, S., L. Elish-Piper, and R. M. Bean. 2010. What matters for elementary literacy coaching? Guiding principles for instructional improvement and student achievement. *The Reading Teacher* 63 (7): 544–554.
- Morrow, L. M., H. Casey, and C. Haworth. 2003. Staff development for early literacy teachers: A plan to facilitate change. In *Literacy and young children: Research-based practices*, ed. D. M. Barone and L. M. Morrow, 3–22. New York: Guilford.
- Mraz, M., B. Algozzine, and B. Kissel. 2009. *The literacy coach’s companion: PreK–3*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Mraz, M., B. Algozzine, and P. Watson. 2008. Perceptions and expectations of roles and responsibilities of literacy coaching. *Literacy Research and Instruction* 47 (3): 141–157.
- Mraz, M., B. Kissel, B. Algozzine, J. Babb, and K. Foxworth. 2011. A collaborative professional development initiative supporting early literacy coaches. *NHSA Dialog* 14 (3): 174–184.
- Paramore, T. 2007. Coaching conversations for beginners. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 3 (1): 71–81.
- Salas, S., and L. Mercado. 2010. Looking for the big picture: Macrostrategies for L2 teacher observation and feedback. *English Teaching Forum* 48 (4): 18–23.
- Scott, S. E., K. S. Cortina, and J. F. Carlisle. 2012. Understanding coach-based professional development in Reading First: How do coaches spend their time and how do teachers perceive coaches’ work? *Literacy Research and Instruction* 51 (1): 68–85.
- Shanklin, N. L. 2006. *What are the characteristics of effective literacy coaching?* Urbana, IL: Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Stephens, D., D. N. Morgan, D. E. DeFord, A. Donnelly, E. Hamel, K. J. Keith, D. A. Brink, et al. 2011. The impact of literacy coaches on teachers’ beliefs and practices. *Journal of Literacy Research* 43 (3): 215–249.
- Toll, C. A. 2005. *The literacy coach’s survival guide: Essential questions and practical answers*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- . 2007. *Lenses on literacy coaching: Conceptualizations, functions, and outcomes*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Walpole, S., and K. L. Blamey. 2008. Elementary literacy coaches: The reality of dual roles. *The Reading Teacher* 62 (3): 222–231.

Maryann Mraz, PhD, is a Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the author or co-author of over 60 books, articles, and chapters on literacy education. She has served as a Board Member for the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers.

Spencer Salas, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K–12 Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Leonardo A. Mercado, originally from Queens, New York, is the Academic Director at Euroidiomas and has been an ESL/EFL teacher, teacher trainer, program administrator, and certified language proficiency tester for more than 20 years.

Masenny Dikotla is Chief Executive Officer at the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, South Africa.