

DIFFERENTIATED

# LITERACY COACHING

*Scaffolding for Student and Teacher Success*

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# Differentiated Literacy Coaching

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# 1

## **The Context for a Literacy Coaching Continuum**

With the ever-increasing focus on reading achievement in schools today, many districts are hiring literacy coaches to provide embedded professional learning opportunities for their teachers. Coaching holds great promise as a tool to increase teachers' content knowledge. It's an essential ingredient in educators' efforts to increase student achievement, and it has the potential to nurture a culture of academic focus by valuing current professional knowledge and extending and enhancing effective pedagogical practice.

The use of literacy coaches is not without controversy, however, and there are a number of reasons for this, including uncertainty about the purpose of literacy coaching, multiple interpretations of the title and role of a literacy coach, and the varying qualifications of the individuals hired to provide the coaching support.

Some educators perceive coaching as punitive—a remedial service for those who aren't teaching up to standard. Others view the coaching experience as evaluation under the guise of support or as directives in reflective disguise (the wolf in grandma's clothing). Still others consider coaching an unnecessary distraction from the daily business of teaching and suggest that coaches reserve their time for "teachers who really need it."

Clearly, one job of a literacy coach is to help school staff grapple with the role itself. *What is a literacy coach, and what exactly does one do?* Without a defined role, coaches may hear comments along these lines: "I've been teaching for a long time. Why don't

you spend time with the people who really need your help?” At a recent meeting I attended, one teacher even referred to coaching as an “expensive waste of time.”

Further testament to the general confusion about the role of the literacy coach is the variety of names the position goes by. In a recent review of the literature, I came across the following monikers: *reading coach*, *expert coach*, *technical coach*, *cognitive coach*, *peer coach*, *collegial coach*, *content-focused coach*, *collaborative coach*, *design coach*, *instructional coach*, *academic coach*, and *reflective coach*. Perhaps the International Reading Association’s *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2007) can provide some clarity? This document defines a reading or literacy coach as

a reading specialist who focuses on providing professional development for teachers by providing them with the additional support needed to implement various instructional programs and practices. They provide essential leadership for the school’s entire literacy program by helping create and supervise a long-term staff development process that supports both the development and implementation of the literacy program over months and years. These individuals need to have experiences that enable them to provide effective professional development for the teachers in their schools. (Category III, bullet 2)

I like this definition. It acknowledges the necessary qualifications of the literacy coach, addresses the ongoing nature of the position, and recognizes that an effective coach must be proactive and have experience working with adult learners.

I won’t presume to endorse a particular term for what coaches should be called, but I believe strongly that the *purpose* of a literacy coaching program and the *roles* of the coaches within that program must be thoughtfully considered and articulated before implementation. When a school considers adding the position of literacy coach to the roster, the first questions that should be discussed are “Why hire a literacy coach?” and “What is the goal of the position?” Often the coach is already on board, and the questions have yet to be asked, much less answered.

When considering and constructing your own response to these key questions, you may find it helpful to review other coaching program policies. Consider the Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) model, launched by the Boston Public Schools in 1996 under the leadership of Superintendent Thomas Payzant. In launching the model, the district’s purpose was to reduce professional isolation and ensure the integration of research-based practice in classrooms. The CCL framework features a six-week cycle of inquiry focused on instructional strategies. Inquiry teams are composed of a content coach, teachers, and the principal. Additional support includes a weekly lab practicum

during which the coach, teachers, and principal take turns teaching and afterward discuss their observations (pre-conference, demonstrations, debrief). Content coaches also visit individual classrooms to support the implementation of the instructional strategies. The four main components of the CCL model—classroom experience, reflection and inquiry, feedback, and theory—exemplify what Linda Darling-Hammond and Milbrey W. McLaughlin (1995) highlight as an essential feature of effective professional development: “It must engage teachers in the concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the process of learning and development” (p. 598).

Another model worth noting is the Arkansas Comprehensive Literacy Model (ACLM), a partnership between the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, the Arkansas Department of Education, and Arkansas elementary schools. It features a schoolwide design for ensuring that all children achieve literacy proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. A planned extension of the ACLM to middle and high schools is in the pilot stage. Within the ACLM model, literacy coaching is 1 of 10 components identified as essential to the process, along with a curriculum for literacy, model classrooms, high standards, accountability, early intervention, professional development, a well-designed literacy plan, technology that includes networking opportunities, and the spotlighting of schools that are achieving high results. Coaches make sure that components of a K–3 reading program—including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and the writing process—are implemented with fidelity.

Successful literacy programs such as Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning model and Arkansas’s Comprehensive Literacy Model underscore the importance of having an identified purpose and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. After all, if the literacy coach or administrator is confused about the roles and responsibilities of the position, why should we be surprised when teachers fail to embrace the model with enthusiasm? If our coaching model is designated as an intervention for some rather than an opportunity for all, why should we be surprised when teachers see the program as corrective in nature?

A report exploring the various roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007) may be a helpful document to consult as you wrestle with these determinations yourself. The authors analyzed Reading First data from five western states to determine how coaches allocated time, performed tasks, and described their responsibilities. As a result of their research, the authors classify coaches into five distinct groupings: “data-oriented, student-oriented, managerial, and

two teacher-oriented categories, one that works largely with individual teachers and another that works with groups” (p. 4). Reviewing and reflecting on the distinctions between these definitions will be a helpful step in determining what you most value in terms of the role of literacy coaches in your model of professional learning.

### **Three Essential Principles of Coaching**

The primary goal of literacy coaching is to improve student learning. Meeting this goal requires an understanding of, and attention to, research on effective district, school, and teacher practices, including a *guaranteed and viable curriculum* and *challenging goals and effective feedback* (Marzano, 2003).

Within the overarching goal of improved student achievement are three essential principles of coaching:

1. Coaching should help establish a school culture that recognizes collaboration as an asset.
2. Coaching should develop individual and group capacity to engage in creative problem solving and self-reflection.
3. Coaching should provide a continuum of professional learning opportunities to support adults in their acquisition and use of specific knowledge, skills, and strategies.

Let’s examine each of these principles more closely.

#### **Recognizing Collaboration as an Asset**

Teaching is an intellectually challenging vocation much too important and complex to do in isolation. In teaching, two (or more) heads *are* better than one. Part of this process of acculturation involves embracing the notion that learning is a social activity (Vygotsky, 1978) that requires community engagement for renewal.

A few years ago, a teacher friend of mine decided to pursue a new career in counseling. Within a few years, she had completed a master’s degree in counseling and begun part-time work at a local hospital. When I talked with her about the differences between professional learning in education and professional learning in the medical field, she described an ongoing process of staff support at her clinic called “case review.” In essence, this process involved each counselor taking turns to share a case study and then having guided conversations with peers about the information presented. The same process would be very helpful in her school setting, she said, because it would

provide an opportunity for the clinician (teacher) to thoughtfully consider a client (student), to review the care (instruction) provided to date, and to summarize the data she had collected to present to her colleagues for the consideration of next steps.

Some readers will recognize this process of shared practice; examples of the process do exist in some school settings. I suggest, however, that the recurring and shared use of case studies is a limited practice in education, even though we know that teachers benefit from this form of reflective collaboration (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Hammerness, Shulman, & Darling-Hammond, 2000; Shulman, 1991). Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002) note that

Teachers and educators around the country are beginning to see that the goal of improving teaching—improving students’ opportunities to learn—can only be reached by a path that the United States has never taken before. This new path moves educators away from a view of teaching as a solitary activity, owned personally by each teacher. It moves them towards a view of teaching as a professional activity open to collective observations, study, and improvement. It invites ordinary teachers to recognize and accept the responsibility for improving not only their own practice, but the shared practice of the profession. For this new path to be traveled, however, teachers will need to open their classroom doors, and rather than evaluating each other, begin studying their practices as a professional responsibility common to all. (p. 1)

### **Developing Capacity for Creative Problem Solving and Self-Reflection**

By developing individual and group capacity to engage in creative problem solving and self-reflection, faculty members are better able to approach teaching as a series of challenges we *respond* to, rather than a series of challenges we *react* to. This renewable form of collaborative energy also provides for authentic and ongoing evaluation to inform and refine subsequent practice in our teaching and our professional learning.

As any new educator (or seasoned educator in a new situation) knows, *reacting* is all too common. For me, the term *react* conjures up memories of classroom occurrences that would just happen out of the blue, without any foresight on my part. Some days it seemed that all I could do was deal with situations as they happened, take a deep breath, and do the very same thing the next day. Everything was new. As a consequence, I didn’t have the resiliency to forecast and prepare for any eventualities, let alone all of them.

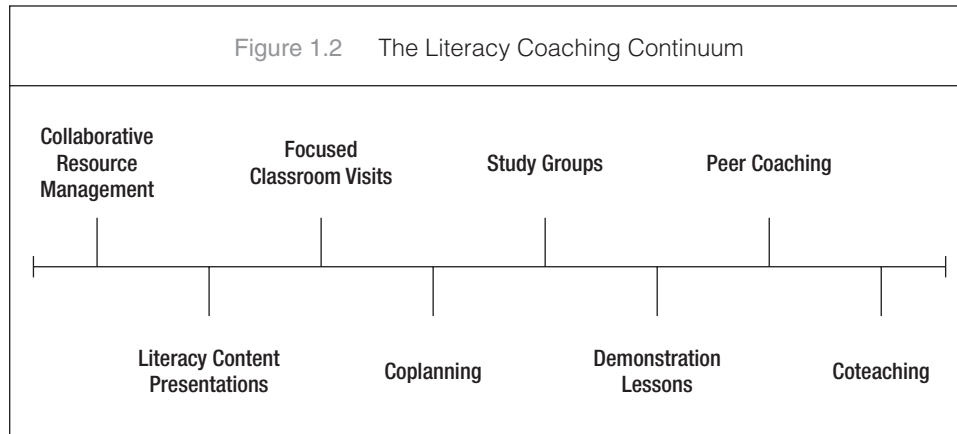
Of course, not even those of us who have years of experience and professional learning under our belts can be prepared for *everything*. I can say, though, that after



A continuum of coaching makes it possible to provide precisely what professionals need to evolve in their practice—a “just right” combination of challenging and respectful learning opportunities that the teachers themselves had a hand in creating. This option represents a more sensible allocation of coaching time and energy, avoiding the one-size-fits-all mentality that shapes so much professional development.

## The Literacy Coaching Continuum

The Literacy Coaching Continuum (see Figure 1.2) is a structure for the kind of participatory professional learning that integrates fundamentals of adult education theory, provides scaffolds according to the needs of individual teachers, and respects and builds on the knowledge that teachers bring to the table. It is a conceptual framework for organizing, managing, assessing, and sharing information about literacy coaching efforts.



As shown in Figure 1.3, the continuum presents eight differentiated learning formats for coaching: (1) collaborative resource management, (2) literacy content presentations, (3) focused classroom visits, (4) coplanning, (5) study groups, (6) demonstration lessons, (7) peer coaching, and (8) coteaching. It assumes that there is a *progression* in the intensity of learning supports that are necessary to sustain a teacher’s efforts to become a more reflective practitioner. For example, the scaffolding provided in resource management (at one end of the continuum) is far less intrusive than the assistance that would be apparent in coteaching (at the other end of the continuum).

Figure 1.3 A Closer Look at the Literacy Coaching Continuum

Learning Format	Description	Potential Roles of the Literacy Coach
Collaborative Resource Management	The literacy coach works with teachers to become familiar with and tap into available resources. This is an opportunity for rich conversation about instruction, grouping, and differentiated instruction.	Resource person, collaborator, encourager
Literacy Content Presentations	The literacy coach provides content knowledge and fosters collaboration. This format ensures that all teachers are on the same page in terms of information, procedures, best practice, and other matters.	Facilitator, expert, resource person
Focused Classroom Visits	The literacy coach provides teachers the opportunity to observe a particular teaching method, learn how other teachers organize for instruction, and develop an understanding of what is expected at other grade levels.	Facilitator, resource person
Coplanning	Teachers work together to review current data and plan instruction. This might include discussion on grouping options, assessment results, and specific lesson planning.	Resource person, collaborator, encourager
Study Groups	A group of educators meets on a regular basis to discuss issues relevant to their teaching. The range of study group options includes job-alike, book study, and action research.	Facilitator, mediator, resource person
Demonstration Lessons	The literacy coach demonstrates particular teaching methods to teachers who are less familiar with these methods or less confident about using them.	Expert, consultant, presenter
Peer Coaching	This is the traditional coaching model whereby the literacy coach observes the classroom teacher and provides feedback during a debriefing session.	Expert, encourager, voice
Coteaching	The classroom teacher and the literacy coach plan a lesson together and share responsibility for the lesson's implementation and follow-up.	Collaborator, encourager, voice

Source: Developed by M. C. Moran and Elizabeth Powers.