



The Fundamentals of Literacy Coaching

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Looking back, it seems that I started down the road to literacy coaching long ago.

I had planned to be a high school English teacher, and I did my student teaching in middle school. Soon, I began also teaching adult basic education and GED classes. The longer I taught adults, the more I realized that many of them couldn't read well enough to meet the demands of their daily lives. I enrolled in university to help me figure out "this reading thing." Though I ended up with a doctorate, I never *did* figure it out!

After graduating, I became a Title I reading teacher, then a consultant supporting other Title I reading teachers. With the advent of schoolwide projects, I soon began to work with classroom teachers as well. Much of what I have contributed to this book I learned from working with these teachers. I saw what little effect "sit-and-get" in-service training had on instruction. As a perennial student, I learned more and more about workshop versus workplace professional development, and I realized that only the combination of both has any real chance of making a difference for teachers and students.

When I was asked to head up the federal Reading Excellence initiative for Iowa's Waterloo Community Schools, I realized immediately that we would need reading coaches. Luckily I found two brilliant people to work with in that capacity. Amy, of course, was one of them. The other was Carol Watson, who was being trained as a Reading Recovery teacher leader but would otherwise have written this book with us. I continued to learn through them as well as through the teachers with whom we worked.

—Maelou Baxter

* * *

Having worked as an elementary classroom teacher, a K–8 Title I reading teacher, and a combination reading teacher/literacy coach, I know what it is like both to be coached and to coach others. I also served as a supervisor of graduate and undergraduate students working with children with reading difficulties at the University of Northern Iowa, where I coached teachers in reflective, diagnostic instruction. Later, at the Iowa Department of Education, my philosophy of “coaching the teacher as reflective practitioner” was strengthened by coaching gurus Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman, who taught me their model of cognitive coaching. I went on to apply lessons from this training to the over 100 school districts that I’ve served as a consultant for the Bureau of School Improvement. As a liaison for the state reading initiative, I affirmed my commitment to in-the-workplace modeling, coaching, and follow-up.

My passion for literacy coaching increased tenfold after working in the trenches in the Waterloo Community Schools, where I served as a full-time literacy coach and helped create a peer-coaching framework.

—Amy Sandvold

* * *

Through our sometimes painful experiences, we have collected valuable knowledge that can help guide the efforts of literacy coaches and the administrators who oversee their work. These experiences, the excitement and satisfaction we have found in

them, and our desire to spare you at least *some* of the pain that we have endured have encouraged us to share with you the fundamentals of literacy coaching.

—*Maelou and Amy*

Although committing to literacy coaching takes a lot of money and mind power, it's well worthwhile, because coaching has been shown to increase teacher expertise (Van Pelt & Poparad, 2006), and teacher expertise in reading instruction improves student reading achievement (Allington, 2002). The process does not have to be complicated, but it does require some forethought.

Know Your Purpose

It's *all* about student achievement. Student achievement results from expert teaching, and it is the purpose of coaching to *promote* expert teaching. It's a simple formula—

Literacy Coaching → Expert Teaching → Student Achievement

—but it's easy, as you become more and more involved in the details, to forget the ultimate purpose. It's not to make teachers happy, it's not to fulfill the requirements of the state department of education, it's not to satisfy your own administrators—it's to increase student achievement. For a literacy coaching effort to produce the expert teaching that can accomplish this, a good, basic plan should be in place from the start.

Here are some questions to consider prior to setting up a coaching initiative:

- Are there special barriers to expert teaching in your school or district for which you must plan? For example, are there inconsistent instructional practices or curriculum changes that require additional teacher training? Is there high student or teacher mobility?
- What will the coaching model look like?

- Will coaches be hired at several district schools or only at one?
- Will the literacy coaches also work as part-time reading teachers?

Maelou was working as a Title I reading consultant in Iowa's Waterloo Community Schools when she was asked to help write a grant application for a reading improvement initiative. She agreed to do what she could and ended up helping create a whole new reading framework for the district, including a reading and language arts curriculum complete with objectives, materials, and sample lessons.

When Maelou first began working on the initiative, over 100 different instructional methods were being used in the district's 14 elementary schools. It was possible to go from one 2nd grade classroom to another at the same school and see different methods and books employed. Lacking sufficient guidance, the teachers had figured out for themselves what methods and materials would work best for their students.

Obviously, the district needed a consistent instructional approach and quality professional development for the teachers. Research and experience suggested that the teachers would need ongoing, on-site support to put into practice a literacy coaching framework. The district only had the money to hire coaches for the four schools that had received the grant, so the coaching model had to be devised on a small scale and only later developed into a districtwide effort. The budget restriction ended up being a blessing in disguise, as it provided an opportunity to work out the model's kinks and to compare the four targeted schools to the rest.

Maelou realized early on that coaching had to be a part of the plan. For too long she had seen teachers struggle alone, wanting to do their best for their students but not always knowing what the best was. These teachers needed a critical, supportive friend to stand beside them and help them be their best.

Choose the Right Coach

Before starting a search for a coach or even writing a job description, administrators should familiarize themselves with the professional standards for coaches. The International Reading Association states that, at a minimum, coaches must meet the association's standards for reading specialists and obtain their reading specialist certification within three years (International Reading Association, 2004). In the meantime, reading specialists should directly supervise coaches who do not have the certification.

Coaches need to exhibit flexibility, an ability to work with others, good listening skills, and other personal attributes that can't be discerned from a transcript or diploma. These attributes are just as important as academic knowledge and should be assessed through interviews and discussions with the prospective coaches' references. To ensure that only qualified coaches are considered, the district should draft a job description that explains the role in detail, such as in Figure 1.1.

Making certain everyone is familiar with the job description will help avoid uncomfortable situations. For example, a coach should never be directed to observe a teacher and provide the principal with feedback: even if the coach does not serve as an evaluator—and we highly recommend that he or she not do so—providing feedback to the principal can damage the trust between teacher

FIGURE 1.1	Sample Reading Coach Job Description
<p data-bbox="222 409 406 435">Teacher Support</p> <ul data-bbox="222 449 911 956" style="list-style-type: none">• Builds good interpersonal relations and establishes positive rapport with colleagues• Proactively supports teachers• Helps teachers implement the reading and language arts curriculum guide activities• Selects and gathers resources and related materials to enhance and support the reading and language arts curriculum guides• Uses cognitive coaching and other district-recommended strategies for small-group instruction and working with words• Helps teachers plan lessons, observes teaching in action, provides feedback, and models best practices for small-group reading instruction and working with words• Observes and assesses students in class and helps teachers problem solve as needed <p data-bbox="222 1008 445 1034">Program Facilitation</p> <ul data-bbox="222 1048 919 1446" style="list-style-type: none">• Provides coaching in the development, implementation, and monitoring of research-based practices in reading and language arts• Attends some team leader meetings• Communicates and publishes deadlines for forms (e.g., implementation logs, time sheets)• Helps determine professional development needs in the area of language arts and provides professional development as appropriate• Organizes professional development presentations• Participates in and supports data-driven decision making at the school and district level	

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