

Do's and Don'ts for Literacy Coaches: Advice from the Field

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Literacy or instructional coaches are becoming increasingly important in schools at all grade levels (kindergarten through grade 12). Because this is a growing professional leadership role, there is a new excitement about possible improvements to literacy instruction and increases in student achievement that may result from having formalized, in-school leadership. According to the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), literacy coaches are assuming a range of complex tasks within schools. They participate in instructional planning, assist in assessment of students, and spend a substantial amount of time coaching—observing, demonstration teaching, and talking to teachers about instruction (www.literacycoachingonline.org).

Many coaches enjoy their new role and find that teachers are receptive and eager to benefit from the support they receive. At the same time, given the newness of this role, and the different ways that coaches are viewed—by teachers, administrators, and even school board members—coaches are eager to get as much information as they can about how to perform their role effectively. The intent of this brief is to provide ideas that have come from the field—from coaches themselves who have learned “on the job.” Some of these coaches work in elementary schools,

others in middle or high schools. The information was obtained from studies that we have done and from informal interviews that we conducted with coaches at various levels—primary, intermediate, middle, and high school. In this brief, we share with readers ideas that we hope will help all coaches, but especially the new coach, to work effectively in a school.

What's Important to Do!

Introduce yourself and your role (Tell AND Show). Although many coaches understand the importance of explaining what the position is and is not, an introduction at one meeting is often not enough. New coaches should probably take a few minutes to talk at a faculty meeting AND distribute a short flyer outlining their responsibilities, contact information, and availability. However, follow-up meetings with individual faculty or groups of faculty, perhaps grade level or subject specific, provide an opportunity for interaction and discussion. These follow-up meetings provide teachers with the chance to learn more about how the coach can support their work in the classroom AND provide the coach with a better sense of the teachers and their interests and needs. Teachers need to understand how they might work with a coach and what the benefits might be.

Work with all teachers. A coach needs to make sure that teachers and administrators understand that he or she is there to assist in improving instruction for ALL students; therefore, it is important to support all teachers. One of the quickest ways to reduce teacher interest in working with a coach is for teachers to think the coach is there to “fix them up”—as if they are not doing their jobs or are considered to be weak. This FIX-IT APPROACH breeds fear, resentment and resistance. Coaches who find themselves in this predicament have a difficult time working as a colleague with teachers.

DO: I have learned to assume that two people are not talking about the same thing just because they are using the same language. —Shannon Toole, Literacy Coach, Ballenetine Elementary School, SC

Work first to establish a relationship of trust.

Almost every coach with whom we have worked has made this statement in some form or another: you have to develop a good relationship with teachers—otherwise you cannot be successful as a coach. When we ask coaches to give us specific examples, they identify the following:

Listen carefully. When coaches listen more and talk less, they let teachers know that they value teachers’ thoughts and opinions, and that they will try to understand teachers’ questions and concerns. Relationships are built as people talk together, share ideas and experiences, and over time, learn to understand and respect each other. Listening also allows the coach to explore the variety of experiences, perspectives, and talents that each teacher brings to the community that the coach and teacher are building together.

Maintain confidentiality. Coaches who talk about

DO: Help teachers stop and reflect on what they are teaching. Coaches help teachers open doors through which we walk together. —Judy Berg, Literacy Coach, J.P. McCaskey High School, School District of Lancaster, Lancaster, PA

what they have seen in classrooms or what they think about a specific teacher will not be welcomed as a colleague. Coaches must maintain confidentiality, not

only in talking with other teachers, but also in their conversations with administrators. Coaches who are seen as a “snitch” have difficulty convincing teachers that they are there as colleagues to support instruction. Word spreads quickly!

Begin with those who want to work with you. Although we have indicated above that it is important to work with all teachers, the coach who is new to the job should begin by working with teachers who request support. By doing this, the coach can gain a sense of self-confidence (I can do this!); moreover, word is likely to spread that “coaching doesn’t hurt.” Good initial experiences—for coach and teachers—generally lead to requests from other teachers.

Work from teachers’ agendas. Although one of a coach’s responsibilities may be to assist teachers in implementing a specific curriculum or strategy, there are many ways to accomplish this goal. Look for teachers’ strengths, find out about their interests, or the questions they may want to explore. If teachers choose or self-select the aspect of instruction or curriculum to be addressed, follow-through and lasting change are more likely.

Be positive. If you seek to encourage conversations and support teachers in taking risks, they are more willing to try new ideas and practices. Coaches tell us that it is important to keep judgments out of the conversation! When trying something new, teachers need to reflect and evaluate possibilities, and through dialogue, receive affirmation and confirmation about actions taken and results achieved. This process helps them sort through what is working and what is not, and sets them up for their next steps. Honest praise, thoughtful response, and supportive feedback build stronger relationships.

Follow-through. Teachers in one school who were asked to give feedback to their coach indicated that they avoided working with her because often she did not follow-through on a commitment, e.g., to meet, to be in the classroom at a specific time, OR to provide materials or resources. What we learned was that often this coach was called away to attend meetings or to assist the principal with some administrative responsibility. Once the coach informed her principal about teachers’ concerns, the principal modified his actions and reduced his dependency on the coach to assume these administrative tasks. This coach, of course, was fortunate that her administrator was willing

to listen to the teachers and their concerns—and willing to change.

DO: Fulfill promises and follow through. Teachers are already giving up their prep time to meet with me, so a coach who fails to show up will break any trust established between coach and teacher. —*David Cohn, Literacy Coach, William Penn High School, School District of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA*

Work with your administrator. Anytime we meet with coaches, we are told the importance of having a good working relationship with the principal. Coaches say that the principal must understand what the coach’s role is—and isn’t. The coach is not a “semi-administrator” who is there to evaluate the work of teachers. A written job description helps—insist on it. Such a description should be one that is agreed upon district-wide to provide for consistency across schools; it also promotes support at the district level. Sometimes the coach has to write the job description and then provide it for administrators to review. A job description should include a statement about the collegial, supportive role of the coach in improving instructional practice.

Second, the coach must keep the principal informed about what is going on relative to improving literacy instruction. For some coaches, informing means a daily or weekly meeting. Other coaches indicate that they interact via email or written reports but meet occasionally to talk about specific issues or challenges. The approach to communication differs, depending on the principal. But as one principal indicated, “I think about the big picture, but my coach keeps me apprised about the details. She reminds me about what I need to do to support my teachers in their job.” What is critical is that the principal is aware—and supportive—of the work of the coach.

When there are difficulties—and there most likely will be—the coach needs the support of the principal. In some schools, coaches have experienced difficulties because of contractual issues: Can coaches actually observe teachers without being invited, etc.? Or the coach, principal, and a teacher may need to sit together to talk about a specific issue. With administrative support and understanding, the coach is NOT isolated

and will have opportunities to facilitate change in the school.

Recognize—and appreciate—differences in teachers and how they work. Successful coaches tell us that, just as one acknowledges differences in students, coaches need to recognize and celebrate differences in teachers. Coaches must be flexible and adjust what they do, depending on needs, interests, and the personalities of teachers. Some teachers want the coach to serve as a resource, providing materials, ideas, or suggestions, in an informal manner. Others value the coach as a peer, working collaboratively to problem-solve issues related to specific students and instructional strategies. Some teachers actually want the coach to serve as an expert, providing information about various instructional or curricular notions. And a few want the coach to serve as a “sounding board,” someone who just sits and listens to their concerns. But as one literacy coach indicated, “Depending on a specific situation, teachers will want to work in different ways.” It is important, then, to remember that with the same teacher, a coach may serve as an expert, and then at a later date, work collaboratively to discuss a specific problem that has arisen.

Recognize your own beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning. Just as teachers differ in how they approach teaching and learning, so do coaches. Each coach must be cognizant of his or her own beliefs and acknowledge that these beliefs can influence how the coach interacts with teachers who may have different classroom management styles or instructional approaches. As one coach acknowledged, “I like a very structured, organized classroom. But there are teachers who can function without that structure. I’m not looking to clone myself.” At the same time, the coach must support and help to enact a vision about literacy instruction as he or she coaches. While this vision is most likely one that has been determined by the school, it is further shaped by the school community; at the same time, coaches often influence how the vision is achieved. Each year brings new emphases that clarify or extend this vision. Each coach needs to assess his or her own shifts in beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning as the collaborations across participants deepen.

Establish priorities. A coach has many responsibilities and duties that need to be accomplished in a set period of time. The coach needs to determine what is more important in terms of influencing teacher practice and student achievement. In other words, a coach needs to decide how to best spend the day. As one coach stated, “What will give me the best bang for my buck?”

Let the data lead! Often the entry into the teacher’s world is gained by thinking about the students in that classroom. By using work samples, teachers’ observations, and results from various assessment measures, the coach and teacher can think about what the students know and where they are experiencing difficulties. The question becomes, “What can we do together that will help students learn more effectively in this classroom?” In other words, data can lead the coach and teacher to think about materials, activities, and instruction that better meets the needs of students.

Be a learner. Most coaches are teachers, and as such, they are on an equal plane with teachers in their buildings. We have found that holding a collaborative stance with teachers requires that a coach BE a learner—many situations arise in which the coach really does not know exactly what to do. Working side-by-side in honest inquiry with teachers encourages all participants to share, to reflect, to stretch, and to consider multiple possibilities before making decisions. When problems arise, the group discusses them, considers different perspectives, and establishes priorities or possible solutions. Coaches tell us that this “tentative” stance allows for a greater level of group participation, fosters higher levels of engagement during professional development sessions, and ensures that teachers own the process and the solutions (consensus building). Together, we build new knowledge and extend our understandings toward common goals.

DO: Acknowledge and celebrate strengths. Ask for self-evaluation. Get consensus on what might help and don’t be afraid to get in there and demonstrate. —Linda Scott, former Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, Lucasville, OH

Document your work. Given the relative newness of coaching and the lack of extensive empirical evidence about its effectiveness, it is critical that coaches keep track of what they are doing and with whom they are working. Keeping a log that summarizes the day’s work helps when the administration or school board begins to question the value of coaching or its cost-effectiveness. Taking time to reflect on what a coach has done can also provide the coach with insights to guide future work with teachers.

What’s Important to Avoid (The Don’ts)

Don’t evaluate teachers. Most books on coaching rightly contain a caution against coaches serving in an evaluative role. In other words, coaches should not be writing a formal assessment of what they have seen in the classroom nor should they be reporting to administrators what they have seen in individual classrooms. Evaluation can become an issue when the principal does not understand the role of the coach or when the coach, himself or herself, does not have a clear understanding of how detrimental such behavior can be. Most often, the coaches with whom we talk do not want to serve in such a capacity; they recognize that such behavior limits teachers’ acceptance of them and their role. Coaches have told us that they have been asked to observe with principals (and then talk about what they have seen). They have also been asked to sit in on administrators’ post-observation conferences with weak teachers. Often, these principals indicate that they include the literacy coach because the literacy coach has the necessary knowledge and skills to help a teacher improve. We believe that a better way of handling this type of situation is for the principal to indicate to the teacher (after observing) that the principal has some concerns and to suggest to the teacher that working with the coach might be a way of enhancing instruction. The teacher should then be the one to contact the coach.

Don’t fall into the trap of acting like the “Expert!” If literacy coaches are to improve the instructional capacity in a building, they must work collaboratively with teachers. When coaches are viewed as the “experts,” they alone are charged to find the answers or solve the problems, and given the complexity and challenges in education, there is

seldom one right answer. Moreover, teachers are less likely to accept and use the solution proposed by the coach, nor will they have a complete understanding of the solution. To the degree possible, coaches must establish themselves as colleagues who are working with teachers to solve the educational problems in that building or classroom. So, although coaches have high levels of expertise, their primary responsibility is to use that expertise to help all involved develop solutions or options that address instructional issues.

Don't jump in and expect immediate change. Many coaches begin to feel “burnout” in the first semester in which they start coaching teachers. Once they stand back and gain a bit of perspective, they realize they have been pushing on too many different fronts because they want to make change happen immediately. Most research on educational innovation indicates that change takes time—as much as four to five years. So a coach can take a deep breath, slow down, and celebrate individual, small steps toward an overall vision.

Don't be invisible. After a coach has helped people understand his or her varied roles, the coach should be available and visible to perform them. One coach suggested that the coaches' office should be near a busy location as coaching opportunities are more likely to happen when the coach is nearby rather than at the end of a very long hallway at the farthest end of the building. Another coach felt that regular communication, follow-up visits, and email were critical to building community and trust.

Don't avoid the tough issues. If something is standing in the way of progress, it won't begin to happen at all if everyone avoids the barrier. If a coach has established a trusting relationship with teachers, teachers will be the first ones to bring “the elephant out

of the closet” and talk about what went wrong or what they are having problems with in their classrooms. But for those who find reflection hard, or for those who may become defensive, it is better to work through the needs of students and encourage reflection or self-evaluation as a way to start the conversation.

Don't sweat the small stuff! A coach may worry about many small problems, from a teacher grumbling about the fact that he has to attend an after school workshop that has no relevance to him or to the fact that the schedule for state testing has disrupted coaching plans. Coaches should not be concerned with conditions that they cannot change or with insignificant matters that can overpower more significant ones. Moreover, coaches should not take these troubles home but should leave them at school.

Although individual coaches might contribute more “Do's and Don'ts,” this initial list includes

DON'T: Take it personally. There may be some negativity when you are just beginning; it takes time to build rapport and get your message out there. We have really moved along since last year! —*Angelae Dexheimer, Literacy Coach, Scranton High School, Scranton School District, Scranton, PA*

many important ideas that coaches in the field have highlighted as critical. They emphasize that coaching is a collegial, collaborative process. Most importantly, they remind us that this important role requires that coaches and teachers work together towards a common goal, that of effective instruction that leads to student learning. Together, we can address the issues or challenges that face us in achieving this goal. In that sense, it is a journey worth taking.

The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, a joint project of IRA and NCTE, provides coaches with many additional resources to make their work successful. Please take time to explore the website (www.literacycoachingonline.org).

DON'T: Put your office near the principal's office. You may be considered more of an administrator than a coach. **DO:** Try to put your office in a busy location. I am near the student's bathroom. I can't count the coaching opportunities I have had while the students were using the bathroom. —*Celeste Graham*