

# One Conversation: Exploring the Role of Culture in Coaching

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This brief is one coach's perspective on the ways that culture and race may impact how we engage other professionals in our roles as literacy coaches and at the same time, explore how cultural sensitivity may increase the capacity for fundamental change in the schools we serve. It is written in response to the many conversations I have had with African-American colleagues who grapple with issues of race and culture as they work in their various schools and districts. It is not meant to be a "how-to" guide, but more of a tool that can be used to open dialogue on what Roland S. Barth calls a "non-discussable" (Barth, 2005).

## Who I Am

Experience has taught me that coaching is hard and "heart" work. A Literacy Coach Specialist with the South Carolina Reading Initiative for the past eight years, I have worked with school-based literacy coaches across the state, supporting their work with teachers. Through hundreds of observations, endless conversations, and through countless hours of deep, reflective thinking, I have come to the conclusion that we coach who we are; that coaching, like teaching, is a "truly human activity" and that the way in which one coaches "emerges from one's inwardness, for better or for worse" (Palmer, 2007).

Having read a multitude of coaching books, and having attended several coaching workshops and having had exposure to various coaching models, and having lived the life of a literacy coach for almost nine years, I know a lot about the practical and theoretical side of coaching. I know how to do my job. I know that coaching is about listening and looking at data and posing the right question at the right time and providing the right resources and demonstrations and moving teachers toward making informed decisions about how to better meet the learning needs of their students. I know how to coach.

I also know this: I am a southern, African-American woman, who also happens to be a Literacy Coach Specialist.

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## External Tensions

*I don't know how much longer I can do this. I'm so tired. Tired of always having to prove myself...always worrying about whether or not I should open my mouth for fear somebody's gonna say, "here she goes with the race thing, again" ... But, if I don't speak up, who will?*

~Personal Journal Entry, March, 2006

In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the conflict that exists in being Black in America. He spoke of "...double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness...two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 5).

Based upon my own experiences and those shared with me by other African-American coaches, there continues, for us, to be an on-going struggle with the "two-ness" DuBois describes. It is a constant juggling act; working in the education world—its practices and customs steeped in mostly White middle-class values—while holding onto our African-American roots. One community asks us to adopt its norms and values, and the other says "Don't forget where you come from." And "Take us with you."

## Internal Tensions

For as long as I can remember, I have been faced with moments that I now call Crash (Haggis, 2005) episodes, in which the messages of my inner self collide with the messages of others' inner selves. In my position as a Literacy Coach Specialist, there are times in which I am enraged by the subtle and sometimes overt statements or actions by colleagues that call into question my competence as a literacy leader or my ability to perform as a literacy coach in their particular school districts, evoking another message from my community, "Now, folks are going to think you're not good enough because of the color of your skin." It is in these moments that I instinctively retreat within myself and ask, "O.K., what is this about? Should I take this personally? What do I say? Is it racial?" Sometimes it is racial. Sometimes it is not. But, it is always personal. In my opinion, coaching is personal. Deeply personal.

When I sit knee to knee with another coach, a teacher, a colleague, I cannot ignore the fact that the two of us face not only each other's professional, but also each other's personal identities, and in that moment, our histories inform how the two of us perceive, therefore, interact with each other. In *Beyond the Big House: African-American Educators On Teacher Education*, Geneva Gay put it this way: "My personal is the heart and soul of my professional. It's the bottom line, center of why I do the kinds of things I do" (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Anytime I have a conversation with another human being, we interact with each other through filters of our own identities.

By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of myself: my genetic make-up, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. (Palmer, p. 13)

Our filters may or may not allow us to see beyond the messenger to the message. So, the question, for me becomes, how do I engage with this person in a way that we might move past the "elephant in the room" so we can focus on the work that must be done? The answer, I believe, lies in a greeting and response given by tribes in the Northern Natal region of South Africa:

sawu bona (I see you). sikhona (I am here).

The implication of this exchange is "If you do not see me, I do not exist." This approach to living and being is at the heart of how I believe we should approach coaching, especially in hard situations. It calls for us to be open and to withhold judgment and to seek common ground. It calls for us to silence assumptions and seek understanding. Because our schools are counting on us, our students are counting on us, our communities are counting on us, it is, in my opinion, our responsibility as literacy coaches, to say "I see you" even while we are struggling to be seen.

In an e-mail to me about what I have demonstrated as her Literacy Coach Specialist, Catherine Hamilton, a fellow coach said it this way:

*You are strong and you are a hard worker. You coach hard, when necessary, to awaken the strength and depth of character in others. You are true to who you are! You encourage others to do likewise, while seeking to understand other people's differences. You are a fighter, thus encouraging others to never give up. You teach that the collective united voice of some is a force to be reckoned with, so you empower us to find common ground and to unite for goodness sake!*

## Who We Are or Who We Must Be

At the heart of the SCRI (South Carolina Reading Initiative) coaching model is the belief that coaching is about building trusting relationships. To me, this means not only being honest, but being real. It means being willing to have difficult, but necessary conversations. If teachers are going to make positive changes, coaches must be willing to pose questions that get at the heart of teachers' beliefs—their beliefs about teaching—and their beliefs about those whom they teach. What I often see is that the latter gets in the way of improved instructional practices. Given that most of the teachers and coaches I support work with predominately African-American student populations, I feel compelled to get teachers to interrogate their beliefs about children or adults who are different from them even if these same teachers seem to be resistant to working closely with me. This is one of the most difficult, but rewarding parts of my job. It is difficult because it calls for both of us to reveal ourselves to each other, and sometimes, to ourselves. It has been during some of these moments that I have come face to face with my own prejudices, and let me tell you, it is not a comfortable place to be in, but when it causes us to view each other a little differently, to move closer to understanding, and when it causes a teacher to closer evaluate her attitudes toward her students, the payoff is enormous.

*Often, you didn't just follow the "road less traveled," but were in search of creating a new road altogether. Although, I have to admit, being a part of your region... seemed scary!!! It wasn't until you were gone that I really began to see, understand, and miss being a part of that group... "finding our own way." As a white female, sadly, I don't think that I look often enough for my own path. I don't know...maybe it is because I've been in a comfortable place all my life...but I appreciate the experience (path) that you gave me the courage to take.*

~Kristy Wood, former Literacy Coach

The Coaches I have supported over the years have been Black and White, and when my Coach-Girlfriends and I get together, light conversation inevitably turns to past moments of tension—"hard" conversations we had—deeply personal moments when Truth was the most important thing—when we revealed more of our true selves to each other. Many of those conversations were centered around race. We talk about how we are more aware of how race and culture dictate interactions between human beings and about how we have to become more culturally sensitive. We have learned to ask the hard questions and to ask for clarification where there is confusion. Our conversations are more open and honest, sometimes wrapped in passion and other times in humor.

*Being as how I'm a soul sister myself, my views may be tainted...I may be white but I've got soul!!!! ...One of your greatest strengths is getting at the heart of something and I believe your experiences (the ones you've shared) have directly affected your openness to things. You are not a close-minded person and you try to think about different points of view...you've learned it's ok just to be quiet. This has strengthened your listening skills I'm sure and your ability to see more than just the outside of others.*

~Donna Prescott, Literacy Coach

Step by step, we are helping each other, and hopefully the teachers we support, to see their colleagues and children. We may not all be at the same level of cultural sensitivity, but together, we are “finding our own way.”

### So, what?

I don't say, 'This is what I learned' or 'This is what you should learn,' ...Rather, I ... ask you to learn something. It will make your life richer, finer. You will be more proud of yourself, more happy to be within your own skin. You will like yourself more.

~Maya Angelou (2008)

At risk of sounding like the idealist I am sometimes accused of being, my hope is that by reading this brief, at least one coach will feel less alone. Less invisible. And another will sit closer and look deeper into the eyes of someone who is not of her race or culture. And yet another will take a stand, no matter how small—against policies and practices and attitudes that keep us, whoever we are, divided along racial and cultural lines. And finally, that each of us will impact at least one teacher so that she is moved to “see” her students in ways she has not before and maybe, just maybe, we will have such a positive effect on our teachers that they will take up the challenge to seek equity in their schools. I believe it can happen. One conversation at a time.

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