

Literacy Coaching Redefined

by Michelle Zimnisky

Is the Craft of Literacy Coaching Endangered?

When I was a literacy coach, it was incumbent upon me to lead teacher growth, and therefore student learning, in all things literacy in my school. “All things literacy” included everything from curriculum, to instruction, to assessment, in the areas of reading and writing. Yes—reading and writing, that’s it.

As the digital age has seeped into every nook and cranny of our existence, many of us have become familiar with such terms as “visual literacy” and “digital literacy”. The term “assessment literacy” and a near infinite amount of literacies are a part of our world of education, too. Therefore, when asked if literacy coaching is endangered, the answer is yes. And no.

In today’s world, the question is not just whether or not a person is literate, rather, the question is, “Is the person literate in (fill in the blank) subject?” As a result, you are more likely to come across an *instructional* coach, a *math* coach, a *technology* coach, or a *leadership* coach, and so on. If the person is focusing on good instruction across all content, then *instructional* coach is the reasonable title. These people are coaching educators to be *literate* in the identified topic. So, what then, do we call the person who coaches the teaching of reading and writing now? I propose something like “English Language Arts (or ELA) Coach” to be consistent with the current terminology for reading and writing instruction and to not confuse ourselves with the ever growing definition of literacy. Literacy coaching hasn’t died, it has been reincarnated with a new name.

Selecting the Best Content Area or Instructional Coach

The key phrase here is *selecting the best*. Coaches should never, ever, be the “last man standing” so to speak. It shouldn’t be the person who reluctantly agrees to do the job because no one else will (Boogren, 2016). Nor should the person in the role of coach be the person who really needs to be out of the classroom for the good of the kids; there are other ways to help that person find a better fit, and we all know this. A *content area* coach should be someone who is a distinguished instructor in that content area; they need to deeply know the language of the content

area standards. For example, a math coach should know—and speak—the language and vocabulary of the math standards. An *instructional* coach should be distinguished in best instructional practices that bridge *all* content areas; in this day-and-age that also means knowing the language and vocabulary of the instructional framework used in your district. To boot, this person needs to be committed to staying on top of their game through ongoing learning to remain cutting edge; the type of person that makes a good coach recognizes that even the “best” can still get better. That said, content knowledge, strong instructional best practices, and speaking a common language of instruction are just the tip of the iceberg (Marzano and Simms, 2013).

She or he needs to be not just competent, but compassionate, confidential, collaborative, and communicative. The person in the role of coach absolutely and positively needs to be respected and trusted among staff. In short, the person is not just good with students, they work well with adults. Indeed, the person should be nothing short of a super hero—our well respected, competent, best-of-the-best. If this worries you about taking your best teacher(s) out of the classroom, let me say this: when well selected, an instructional coach will have a far wider reach in the learning of far more students in the new role. Choose wisely.

The Coach Needs to Coach

Coaching itself is a skill. Whomever you put in the role of coach needs to learn to be well-versed in *coaching*. If they aren’t already well-versed in coaching, I highly recommend making this a priority. It takes training and practice in the art of coaching, regardless of subject matter, to be as effective as possible and have that “far wider reach in the learning of far more students” that gives you the solace of taking that highly effective educator out of their previous role. Sending a person to a coaching conference soon after they are hired as a kick off to the job will pay off in dividends. Following up with ongoing learning and collaboration with other coaches is recommended as well. Any coaching tools or trainings from the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP), Art Costa, Bob Garmston, Laura Lipton, Jim Knight, or Marzano Associates, to name a few, are sure bets.



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National Board Certified Teacher, Early and Middle Childhood Literacy: Language Arts, 2009

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Is a Washington State framework trainer for the Marzano Instructional Framework

Currently an administrator (assistant principal) in Puyallup School District

The Coach Isn't God

I know. You may be feeling like finding a good coach is like finding the Savior of Education. The truth of the matter is, in our world of vast and growing information, no one can know everything. A good coach also knows how to connect people and is well-connected. They recognize their own growth areas and they know (or quickly come to know) the people for whom that area is a strength. And really, educators everywhere have strengths. A very powerful tool for coaches

is facilitating learning walks and peer coaching. Everyone has something to offer and something to learn. Facilitating such processes builds more trust and confidence in the coach, colleagues, and each educator's feelings of self-worth and growth mindedness.

Keep the C's in Mind

As you ponder literacy's expanded definition and the power of coaching the vast areas in which we strive to be literate, keep these concepts in mind: competence,

compassion, confidentiality, common language, collaboration, communication, and connecting. It's literacy coaching redefined to just... coaching.

References

- Boogren, T. (2016, September 8). *Supporting Beginning Teachers* [Webinar]. Retrieved from <http://mkt.solution-tree.com/l/77002/2016-08-17/2qg8jw>
- Marzano, R. & Simms, J. (2013). *Coaching Classroom Instruction*. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research.



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