

Defining and Clarifying Your Role

“The more we allow ourselves to unfold, the less likely we are to unravel.”

Irwin Kula

Opening Thoughts: Finding Ourselves

I recently collected from my mailbox six books about literacy coaching that I am previewing for a spring course. Of the six, five open with chapters that are basically “What is a literacy coach?” (cf. Jay & Strong, 2008; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Moran, 2007; Mraz, Algozzine, & Kissel, 2009; Sandvold & Baxter, 2008). This is not surprising considering the confusion under which many coaches work.

In 2007, I attended the International Reading Association (IRA) convention in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. During this conference, hoards of literacy coaches made their way to Atlanta to learn more about literacy and about coaching. While there, I tried to initiate conversations with as many coaches as possible and learn about the work we are doing. It seems that there are as many literacy coaching contexts as there are coaches. Surprisingly, it is not uncommon for the administrators who are hiring a literacy coach to have little idea what a coach should do, and, in many cases, the literacy coaches are mired in confusion as well. In some cases, principals are simply assigned a coach, with little explanation of how the coach might support teachers or how the administrator might support the coach. To muddy things further, many coaches can trace this confusion all the way up the chain of command. This is leading to some tenacious misunderstandings in the field and introduces the risk of diluting the impact of literacy coaching (IRA, 2004).

The tools that follow are designed to help you define and clarify the work in which you are engaging in schools, both for yourself and for those you work with and for. The aim of this effort is to help you focus your energy and to establish a coaching vocabulary between you and your administrators and you and your teachers.

Needless to say, not all coaching positions are created the same and some positions described as “coaching” have little to do with the work of supporting teachers as they improve their instructional practice. My hope is that the tools in this section will inform the decision making of literacy coaches and administrators as they are crafting their job descriptions, establishing the boundaries of their work with teachers, and devising ways to gauge the effectiveness of the coach. Perhaps some of these tools will serve to help administrators and literacy coaches launch literacy coaching in their schools in ways that influence the productivity of their work and the longevity of their roles. While so many principals and literacy coaches are struggling to establish coaching programs and are arriving at approximations that are expensive in terms of relationships with teachers and energy of coaches, here is a concrete place to start exploring what to do and what not to do so that you can engage in less trial and error and in more thoughtful decision making.

If you have already defined and initiated your coaching role in a school and you are rethinking your approach, it is not too late to redefine yourself. These tools hold merit for both the novice and the experienced coach seeking to consider the ways he or she approaches the work of coaching.

Coaching Connection: Living Horizontal in a Vertical World

Thoughtful decision making in the early days of a literacy coaching position is critical because such decisions set in motion patterns of work that may be challenging—although not impossible—to change later. In the earliest work of coaching, it is essential for a literacy coach to pause and reflect before acting. Coaches who are not proactive in developing their roles at the onset of their jobs are likely to find themselves stepping into responsibilities that are incongruous with what they believe about teaching, learning, and literacy coaching.

The other night my 6-month-old son was lying in his playpen. He was on his back, babbling to the rest of the family and looking around the room very seriously. My husband commented that he lives horizontal in a vertical world, and his comment gave me pause. How must it be to exist in a world where your perspective is always different from everyone else’s? Literacy coaches who have fallen into coaching roles accidentally rather than strategically may find themselves in this situation. Even when literacy coaches are thoughtful about establishing the parameters of their jobs, maintaining these limits can remain a continuous challenge.

In fact, for literacy coaches, negotiating the difference in our vantage point and that of others around us is our daily exercise. Whether we are coaches under pressure to act as administrators or constructivists trying

to exist in a standardized universe, the analogy of horizontal and vertical worlds meshing is applicable for many of us.

Related Research: Four Schools, Three Literacy Coaches, and 160 Teachers

Donna Johnson-Lambert (2008), a literacy coach and friend of mine, conducted a fascinating case study that demonstrated how different views of coaching can exist in a school. She examined how four schools representing the primary, elementary, middle, and high school grades within one school system have defined the role of literacy coach. Johnson-Lambert included the county superintendent, the principals from each school, the literacy coaches from each school, and a select group of teachers representing different years of experience and a range of grade levels. She interviewed the superintendent, principals, some teachers, and coaches, and she gave the teachers surveys to complete.

Johnson-Lambert found that what the administrators, teachers, and coaches saw as the role of the literacy coach differed greatly. In addition, administrators and coaches were likely to espouse a philosophical stance and then act in ways that were incongruous. For example, one administrator expressed a strong sentiment that the primary work of the literacy coach was with teachers and in classrooms. However, in reality, the same administrator frequently asked the literacy coach to take on additional responsibilities and to attend meetings and trainings off campus. Interestingly, the coach's absence was noted by teachers who completed Johnson-Lambert's survey.

Johnson-Lambert writes,

Through the collection of this data, as well as from additional research, this researcher has concluded that the role of a literacy coach may be defined by a system and assumed by the administration, but if it is not clearly presented to the teachers and created around their specific needs, the role of literacy coach cannot truly be felt within the school system. (p.3)

The lesson from Johnson-Lambert's research is that literacy coaches and administrators must decide from the onset the nature of the literacy coach's work within the school and then must act in ways that are aligned to these early decisions.

Tools for Defining and Clarifying Your Role

Orientation to Tool 1: Literacy Coaching Role

Reflection Guide

Whether you are exploring the possibility of becoming a literacy coach or you are a seasoned literacy coach committed to reflective practice, the tool below will give you an opportunity to focus your thoughts. The following worksheet, developed by Douglas Fisher and his colleagues at San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA—Nancy Farnan, Leif Fearn, Diane Lapp, and Nancy Frey—is a tool to help you to think deeply about the current direction in your work as a literacy coach.

I see at least three uses for this tool. First, if you are already a literacy coach, this preparatory worksheet can help you think about the school year ahead. One of the lovely things about education is that every year gives us a clean start. We have a few weeks of summer to reinvigorate and renew and then we get to refocus our energies with a fresh perspective. My suggestion to experienced literacy coaches is to adapt this worksheet and consider your responses to the questions listed. Use the exercise to reexamine your beliefs and reflect on your experiences relative to a new school year. I completed this form in preparation for this book and found that it informed my work even after six years of coaching. In thinking back across my years as a coach, I would have completed this form differently at the onset of each school year. Thus, as a series of historical documents it would have captured my learning and professional growth over time.

As a novice coach, use this tool as a way to set in motion a literacy coaching initiative that is rooted in clarity of purpose. Take the time that

LINK TO COACHING FOR BALANCE



To read more about aligning your coaching beliefs to your work, see “Defining Our Beliefs About Literacy Coaching” on page 15 in Chapter 1.

reflection requires in order to set yourself and the teachers in your building up for success. This initial investment promises great dividends in relationships with teachers and instructional improvement.

As a new or prospective literacy coach, you can use this reflective tool in preparation for a job interview or to consider the challenges and the joys of the work. Weigh carefully whether this field is a fit for you. Such an exercise can support you in considering your beliefs and philosophy of coaching so that you don’t find yourself accepting a job that does not allow you to coach in ways that are aligned with your belief system.

LITERACY COACHING ROLE REFLECTION GUIDE



Name _____ Date _____

Questions	Reflections
1. How have your experiences and training prepared you to perform the particular duties and responsibilities of the literacy coach that are most pressing for your school?	
2. How have your experiences facilitating professional learning influenced the way you will develop and support a culture of learning in the school?	
3. If you were facilitating professional learning during the first weeks of school, what topic would you choose? Why? What might a participant expect in the professional learning experience?	
4. Describe the role of performance standards and curriculum in driving instruction. How will you support teachers in using performance standards and the district curriculum to make instructional decisions?	
5. What professional development activities (readings, conferences, peer coaching) have you recently experienced, and what did you learn from them? How will they influence your understandings and practice?	
6. What do you think are the primary roles of a literacy coach? How will you communicate and develop these roles with teachers?	
7. What about literacy coaching excites and concerns you?	

Created by Douglas Fisher and colleagues at San Diego State University.

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Orientation to Tool 2: Questions for Interviewers Rubric

While the Literacy Coaching Role Reflection Guide can help you consider what you might say in an interview for a literacy coach position or how you will move forward in a new year, the Questions for Interviewers Rubric is designed to help you think about the questions you might ask in an interview. Furthermore, it gives you some sample responses that can help you gauge the alignment of the position to the authentic spirit of literacy coaching.

The rubric that follows was developed by the 2007 Literacy Coach Cohort from the University of Georgia, USA. This cohort includes Lois Alexander, Leslie Barrett-Jones, Tonia Bowden-Paramore, Molly Kendrick, Susan Kiningham, Darcie St. Onge, Sharon Smith, Ann Tweedell, and Michelle Vechio-Weinmeister. They wanted something to support them as they pursued literacy coaching positions in schools. They understand that all literacy coaching positions are not equal and that misconceptions about coaching abound. The cohort developed this rubric to make sure that they were pursuing positions that supported their philosophy of coaching and that would set them up for success.

However, in reality, there aren't many dream jobs. Sandvold and Baxter (2008) write,

Any coaching plan should be flexible so that it may be adjusted for changing demands or issues that haven't been considered—after all, no matter how well you do your homework, you won't think of everything! Of course, you want to get as much right from the beginning as possible. (p. 7)

When I examine this rubric, there are parts of it that describe my job as authentically aligned to coaching in its truest sense, and there are other places where the rubric illustrates some of the challenges I face. I think that most literacy coaching jobs are dreamy in some areas and challenging or out-of-sync in other areas. However, it is worthwhile to enter a position understanding the negotiations in which you will need to engage if you are going to maintain your core beliefs. The point of the rubric is not to present you with a model of coaching that is so ideal it can exist only in theory but to help you stay balanced, thoughtful, and proactive.

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS RUBRIC



<p>Run! Don't take this job no matter how much they want to pay you.</p>	<p>This could work out. There is definitely room for improvement, but there is a foundation here upon which you can build.</p>	<p>This could be your dream job. Sign now!</p>
<p>What is your primary goal in hiring a literacy coach?</p>		
<p>We decided to hire a literacy coach because we have many teachers who don't understand how to teach reading and we really need someone to come in and fix them. In addition, we have very low test scores and many of our students are in need of remediation. However, you must remember that this is a temporary position and will not be funded unless we see dramatic improvement in our students' scores.</p>	<p>We have very low test scores and very high ESL and special education populations. Therefore, we have chosen to implement the new "No Reader Left Behind" program. By hiring a literacy coach, not only will we have someone to help educate our teachers about this program but also we will have someone to assist with its numerous assessments and remediation procedures.</p>	<p>A committee of teachers, parents, and administrators identified literacy as a primary concern for our students. They proceeded to explore a variety of options that would help to alleviate this problem and were all very enthusiastic about their findings regarding the use of a literacy coach. After presenting this idea to the remainder of the faculty, it became evident that a literacy coach could play an essential role in helping us meet our literacy goals.</p>
<p>What do you see as my three top priorities as a literacy coach?</p>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implementing our new basal reading program. 2. Increasing our test scores. 3. Reporting to the administrator what the teachers are doing wrong in their classrooms. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Helping teachers who may need support in their reading and writing instruction. 2. Planning professional learning to meet goals we have already identified. 3. Analyzing assessment data and using the data to improve test scores. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning effective professional learning based on the needs of the teachers and supporting the development of professional learning communities. 2. Working with individual teachers to improve student achievement on many measures of achievement 3. Fostering a collective love of reading and writing across the school community (including teachers, students, parents, and community members).

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QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS RUBRIC

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<p>Run! Don't take this job no matter how much they want to pay you.</p>	<p>This could work out. There is definitely room for improvement, but there is a foundation here upon which you can build.</p>	<p>This could be your dream job. Sign now!</p>
<p>What do you and your faculty see as my primary role in your school?</p>		
<p>As you know we are in definite need of improvement in the area of language arts. We feel certain that with your knowledge and background you can "fix us" and implement the programs that the district is suggesting we use.</p>	<p>The concept of a literacy coach is new to us, but one that we are very interested in. We know that we would like you to be our literacy leader and help guide our teachers in the areas of best practices in reading and writing instruction. However, we value your input in regards to what your duties and responsibilities would be.</p>	<p>We see your primary role as literacy leader. We would look to you to support teachers in professional development, conduct non-evaluative classroom observations, and provide feedback to support teachers as they implement strategies that they are learning. Your position would have additional responsibilities, but we are open to negotiating these with you and value your input in crafting your job description.</p>
<p>What is your understanding of a productive relationship between a literacy coach and a principal?</p>		
<p>You will need to report frequently to the principal, because you'll be in the classrooms and see what the teachers are actually doing. You will take orders from both the principal and assistant principal. You will need to check in with them daily to see where you may need to fill in.</p>	<p>You will be considered one of the administrative staff, but you will need to work well with teachers. We may ask you to make periodic reports concerning your work with language arts teachers. This report would include any particular problems you encounter in your observations.</p>	<p>We expect you to work well with both the administrators and the teachers. You will be part of the decision-making team, particularly in adoption of programs relating to reading and language arts, but you will not have an evaluative role. You will often be asked to participate in the hiring process of new teachers. You will be expected to relate any serious problems you see as you visit classrooms.</p>

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QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS RUBRIC

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<p>What have you told your teachers about this position?</p>		
<p>Nothing; our superintendent just told us that we had to hire a literacy coach.</p>	<p>Money has just been appropriated for this position, so the faculty does not know that we are hiring, but this is a request that has come up in discussions about improvement. We want the person we hire to help us explain the role of the coach to the faculty.</p>	<p>You met a few of the teachers you'll be working with because they are here on the interviewing committee. We've had several faculty meetings developing an improvement plan. This position is a request from our teachers, after several different options. A committee visited schools with literacy coaches and conducted interviews with working literacy coaches and teachers. Teachers have had a great deal of input into the role of a literacy coach in our school.</p>
<p>What will be my role in assessment?</p>		
<p>You will be responsible for designing or locating the best assessments to use with our students. You will also be responsible for completing all assessments, recording the data, and suggesting teaching strategies to teachers based on the assessment results.</p>	<p>We have a need to use assessments that will accurately reflect the literacy competency of our students. We do not have a consistent practice in place at this time for assessments. You will need to locate assessments, organize test materials, and train the teachers in the best way to use assessments. There will also be times you will be responsible for tracking student data. You may also need to help give assessments at times, but it will not be the bulk of your job.</p>	<p>We have been working very hard to use effective assessment practices at our school. We use a variety of assessments in addition to data from standardized tests. You will be responsible for using data to inform the coaching you are doing. You will also be expected to look for additional assessments that may better inform our work and provide training in these. It is important for the teachers to assess their children to get a feel for where they are, but there may be times you are asked to help administer assessments as a way of training teachers.</p>

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QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS RUBRIC

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<p>Run! Don't take this job no matter how much they want to pay you.</p>	<p>This could work out. There is definitely room for improvement, but there is a foundation here upon which you can build.</p>	<p>This could be your dream job. Sign now!</p>
<p>How would you like me to handle a situation in which a teacher is not being successful and may need more intervention than I can provide?</p>		
<p>If you ever have a problem with a teacher, you need to inform me so that I can get with him/her and solve the problem.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>More intervention than you can provide? It may be that you will then need to team teach with the teacher until he/she can again gain control. This is your area of expertise, isn't it?</p>	<p>I would like for you to inform me when a situation like this occurs. I would like to discuss what interventions you have tried before I get involved. I will go from there to decide what steps to take next.</p>	<p>Please document all forms of intervention strategies you use to help the teacher. We can get together and brainstorm more possible interventions. I don't want the teacher to feel like a failure, but I don't want the problem to go on. I also don't want to break the trust I know you will have built with the teacher. It may require that I schedule more observations. We'll handle this together if this problem should arise, and I won't move on an issue without meeting with you so that I won't compromise your future work with other teachers.</p>
<p>How do you plan to maintain the boundaries of a literacy coach as a support person rather than an administrator?</p>		
<p>Well, we're going to need to talk about that. How strongly do you feel on this issue? I'm going to need you to enforce the expectations we're putting out there and let me know when and who isn't keeping up with their end of the deal. That's just par for the course with this job.</p>	<p>I didn't realize that was going to be a major issue. Can you explain to me a little why this is such a strong variable in your success as a coach? I'm not saying I won't support this consideration, just that I need some basis and understanding for recognizing its importance.</p>	<p>I completely understand how necessary it is for you to be in a nonthreatening position with faculty. Anything I can do to support development and help preserve those relationships, you just let me know. Rest assured I won't ask you to do anything that I or you believe may jeopardize these boundaries.</p>

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QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWERS RUBRIC

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<p>Run! Don't take this job no matter how much they want to pay you.</p>	<p>This could work out. There is definitely room for improvement, but there is a foundation here upon which you can build.</p>	<p>This could be your dream job. Sign now!</p>
<p>How much time will be allotted for (a) my professional development and (b) working in professional development groups with teachers?</p>		
<p>We are hiring you because we feel that you already have a strong knowledge base in the area of literacy coaching. In order for you to facilitate change, we need you here and, therefore, do not feel compelled to grant you release time during the school day to explore professional development. We feel like this can be accomplished outside of school hours. As far as working in professional development groups with teachers, we don't see this as your main focus. We need you to spend as much time in classrooms modeling instruction, observing, providing feedback, and interacting with students as much as possible.</p>	<p>This is certainly open for discussion, and I would welcome your input. While I feel like you are highly qualified, I understand the importance of ongoing professional development. Perhaps you could submit a proposal outlining your professional development needs. Additionally, I can see the value of you working in professional development groups with teachers, and this is an area for which I would like you to assume responsibility. However, I am not sure how much time this really requires and feel like I need an idea of the goals that the teachers wish to accomplish.</p>	<p>Professional development is highly regarded at this school as we understand the value of continuing to nurture your own professional knowledge. I feel certain that we can strike a balance between your duties as a facilitator and your needs as a learner. All I ask is that you submit a professional development plan to me that outlines the activities and amount of time that you need. Together we can review this and come up with a plan that will ultimately be mutually beneficial to us both. In regards to professional development with teachers, I believe ongoing, well-thought-out development is necessary for any change to occur. I am certainly open to hearing your ideas and the time requirements that you feel are necessary to effectively implement change.</p>

Created by Lois Alexander, Leslie Barrett-Jones, Tonia Bowden-Paramore, Molly Kendrick, Susan Kinningham, Darcie St. Onge, Sharon Smith, Ann Tweedell, and Michelle Vechio-Weinmeister.

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Orientation to Tool 3: Literacy Coach Job Description Worksheet

As described previously, it is common for districts to hire educators to fill literacy coach positions when the district really does not understand the work of a literacy coach. Cathy Toll (2008) writes,

the success of literacy coaches is impeded by a variety of factors: competing programs of instruction; questionable understanding of the literacy process among educational leaders, policy makers, and teachers; failure to clearly define the role of literacy coaches; lack of attention to characteristics of adult learners; and so on. Still we go to work every day with hopes for the success of literacy coaching. (p. 10)

Many literacy coaches are in positions where they are crafting their job descriptions on the run as they are initiating their work with teachers. In such cases, it is to the benefit of the coach and the school for the literacy coach to be proactive in establishing the definitions of his or her work. In other words, if this is your situation, don't wait for someone to come and tell you what to do, because you will run the risk of your school's leadership giving you responsibilities that don't align with your philosophy of literacy coaching. If you are in the position of crafting your own job description, consider yourself fortunate and get busy.

I developed this worksheet after I examined a collection of literacy coach job descriptions from districts around the U.S. This process was enlightening. If I ever had any misunderstandings about the depth and breadth of literacy coach work, they were clarified for me through this exercise. With some very informal analysis, patterns emerged. Most literacy coach job descriptions I studied included items defining work in eight different areas: character, culture, expertise, vision, assessment and data analysis, professional learning, work in classrooms, and program implementation. The categories are condensed below to present a reflective tool for literacy coaches who are involved with defining their own roles. For each category, there is space for development—that is, space for a coach to process and brainstorm or even fine-tune a job description.

I have completed this tool from the perspective of a practicing literacy coach, and I have also found it helpful to reflect on the responsibilities I already carry in my school. This tool gives experienced coaches the opportunity to scrutinize the language of literacy coaching and set themselves up for success. For example, what are the implications of “supporting” and “assisting” versus “monitoring”? If a job description says, “Implements a schoolwide assessment system for monitoring student achievement,” a coach may wonder who will intervene with teachers if the data indicates there are problems.

LINK TO COACHING FOR BALANCE



To learn more about what literacy coaches do, read “What Is a Literacy Coach?” on page 28 in Chapter 2.

LITERACY COACH JOB DESCRIPTION WORKSHEET



Coach _____ Date _____

Area 1: Character—What personality traits does a coach need to be successful? (Ex: Listens well, has strong work ethic, demonstrates flexibility, etc.)
Development:
Area 2: Culture—What are the ways of working and learning together that a coach should help establish? (Ex: Establishes stance of continual learning, promotes tenets of social justice, develops learning communities, fosters culture of trust, etc.)
Development:
Area 3: Expertise—What content knowledge and skill must a coach possess? (Ex: Understands the reading process, demonstrates skill in effective classroom practices, holds expertise in reading research, can establish credibility with teachers, etc.)
Development:
Area 4: Vision—What leadership skills must a coach possess? (Ex: Communicates a sound literacy vision for school, understands steps required to reach literacy goals, develops short- and long-term plans, etc.)
Development:

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LITERACY COACH JOB DESCRIPTION WORKSHEET *(continued)*

<p>Area 5: Assessment & Data Analysis—How should data inform the work of a literacy coach? (Ex: Exhibits comfort and skill with data analysis, uses data to shape classroom practice, collects data and reflects on the progress of students, etc.)</p>
<p>Development:</p>
<p>Area 6: Professional Learning—How should a coach contribute to the professional learning of teachers? (Ex: Facilitates study groups, provides schoolwide professional learning, inventories professional learning needs of teachers, etc.)</p>
<p>Development:</p>
<p>Area 7: Work in Classrooms—How should a coach support the professional learning of teachers within the classroom context? (Ex: Scaffolds teacher professional learning through demonstration lessons, watches teachers teach and supports their reflection, supports teacher learning through a gradual release model, etc.)</p>
<p>Development:</p>
<p>Area 8: Program Implementation—What is the role of the coach in supporting the implementation of the established reading program? (Ex: Coordinates the implementation of the school reading program, distributes literacy program materials, facilitates management of the bookroom, evaluates and helps select reading materials, etc.)</p>
<p>Development:</p>

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Orientation to Tool 4: Literacy Coach Evaluation Form

If the job descriptions of literacy coaches are vague, then it follows that the evaluation of coaches is often nonspecific. It is in the best interest of the coach to investigate upfront, and establish if necessary, the design of his or her evaluation. This tool is one example of a form used in the evaluation of a literacy coach. It was developed by Mark Tavernier for the Clarke County School District in Athens, Georgia, USA, where I work. Clarke County has taken great care to make sure that the job descriptions of literacy and instructional coaches are clear and in alignment with the district goals. They have made sure that the accompanying evaluation forms are parallel with those job descriptions.

If at all possible, I would suggest being proactive in identifying or developing the tool with which your performance will be documented. If your school or district has already developed an evaluation instrument or process for your work, make understanding it one of your first priorities as a literacy coach. You do not want to receive this information at the end of the year, when your practice all year may have been based on different information or none at all.

I have a copy of my job description hanging in my office. This display makes it easy for me to revisit the elements on which my administrators will evaluate me and to keep my practice aligned with the responsibilities I was hired to execute. While this may seem inhibiting, I actually find it relieves pressure. As a literacy coach, having complete information about the expectations for your role will actually make it easier to operate successfully within your job description. If you find the elements of your evaluation confining, then perhaps the coaching position in which you have found yourself does not align with what you believe to be important for the work of a literacy coach.



LITERACY COACH EVALUATION FORM

Coach _____ School _____

Preconference _____ Final conference _____

Quarter 1 date _____ Quarter 2 date _____ Quarter 3 date _____

4 = Fully developed 3 = Evidence 2 = Some/limited evidence 1 = No evidence

	4	3	2	1
Provides instructional support for teachers				
Models lessons in classrooms				
Provides multiple classroom coaching experiences for individual teachers to assist with the implementation of curriculum/instructional practices				
Models routines, procedures, and rituals				
Models the use of technology as an instructional tool				
Arranges for peer observations in other classrooms				
Assesses student progress				
Assists teachers in creating and using assessments and tasks that align to the district curriculum				
Assists teachers in examining student work to share and compare scoring of classroom-based assessments				
Guides and assists teachers in using formative assessment results to continuously monitor, assess, and evaluate student progress				
Guides and assists teachers in using formative assessment results to modify classroom instruction				
Collaborates with administration and staff				
Provides training on the use of district curriculum guides and related instructional materials and resources				
Plans with and guides teachers as they sequence and organize instruction				
Supports professional learning in a variety of ways (coaching, collaborative planning, demonstration and modeling, dialogue, discussion, study groups, etc.)				
Establishes regular times to meet with the administration to discuss progress				
Communicates, in person, with the administration in a timely manner				
Participates in ongoing training and support sessions for instructional coaches				
Comments:				

Created by Mark Tavernier.

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A Coaching Story: Crossing Lines

The value of examining your job description thoroughly and taking the care to weigh it against your personal and professional belief systems is that, in doing so, you set in place boundaries that will guide your daily practice as a literacy coach. These are the lines with which you are likely to wrestle, or to even find yourself inadvertently crossing at times. Nevertheless, they are a place to which you can return when you catch yourself compromising on tenets you have held nonnegotiable for yourself. No matter how vigilant you are as a coach, the competing demands of the job ensure a certain inevitability when it comes to stepping over the lines we set for ourselves. I have been in this confusing place, saying to myself, “Wait a minute. What am I doing here?” Here are three examples of coaches executing responsibilities and roles that are incongruent with their coaching belief systems.

1. Max is a literacy coach in an elementary school that has adopted a new, expensive reading program. As Max is largely responsible for the organization of the school’s collection of leveled texts for guided reading that are housed in the school bookroom, his administrator thought he was a logical candidate for taking inventory of the classroom ancillary materials for the new program at the end of the school year. Max was glad to help and began visiting classrooms with inventory lists and signing teachers’ end-of-the-year paperwork. There were no problems with this task—until he reached a teacher who had misplaced some expensive items. Max then realized the awkward position in which he had put himself and the role of power he had inadvertently assumed.
2. Vonda was a first-year literacy coach who was experienced in and knowledgeable about adult learners. She was skilled at facilitating professional learning, and teachers appreciated the ways she scaffolded them. Recognizing her skill, her administrator asked her to facilitate some professional learning during a faculty meeting. Vonda knew that the topic would be difficult to facilitate with the entire faculty at once and would be better as a topic for grade-level meetings. The challenge of the professional learning was compounded by the fact that the administrator told Vonda about it the day before. Vonda wanted to support her administrator and so she agreed. Not surprisingly, the professional learning did not go well, and teachers were frustrated because they were required to participate in training that was not individualized to their grade-level needs. They perceived that Vonda was involved with planning the context of the professional learning, and some were angry at her.

3. Sarah's administrator wanted a standardized lesson plan format for the whole school. Sarah disagreed with this idea; she felt that giving teachers choices and opportunities to individualize lesson plans would increase their planning energy. However, Sarah knew that her administrator was moving forward with or without Sarah's involvement. Sarah also knew that she was more closely connected to the practices in the classroom and would be able to develop a template that was not too cumbersome for teachers, so she agreed to develop a form for her administrator. However, because Sarah developed the form, she understood it better than her administrator, so it soon fell to her to explain the template to the teachers. Understandably, teachers then felt that they should go to Sarah to petition for changes in the form or to see if they were doing it "right." Sarah suddenly felt that she was in an administrative role and was uncomfortable with the evolution of the responsibilities to which she had committed herself.

Coaching Connection: Wet Cement in the Threshold

The examples detailed in the previous section illustrate the ways a coach can accidentally take on a supervisory role. These missteps can be even more dramatic when a literacy coach takes a coaching position that is dramatically incongruent with his or her philosophies of teaching, learning, and coaching. The topic of missteps reminds me of an experience my husband had when he was living in New York City. He once had some business to take care of in a federal building in Manhattan. While he was inside, the city actually poured a new sidewalk extending from the front door; however, they failed to post any "wet cement" signs near the exit. My husband's first steps out of the building were into very wet cement, into which he sank to the middle of his rather long shins.

Given the confusion around the role of literacy coaches and the critical nature of early coaching decisions, new coaches run the risk of taking their very first steps into "wet cement." Consider this section's tools, your "Wet Cement!" signs. The very first task of a new literacy coach should be to clarify his or her role, that is, to make sure the cement has hardened before stepping into new tasks. The effort of looking before you step is worth the time invested.

You do not have to hurry and work with teachers. Get involved with the work of one or two teachers, reflect and learn from this experience, and move forward from there. As a coach, you would be wise to think more than you act, particularly when you are just getting started. There

are many places to step into “wet cement” when you are beginning as a coach. Tread lightly.

Resources to Help You Define and Clarify Your Role

Three Great Books About Literacy Coaching

1. *The Literacy Coach’s Survival Guide: Essential Questions and Practical Answers* by Cathy A. Toll (2005) is one of my favorite coaching books. This is true partly because it was the first coaching book I ever read, and I am a bit sentimental about it. Mostly, this is true because Cathy hits exactly the right balance between theory and practical application. This book has become a literacy coaching classic.
2. Another favorite literacy coaching book is *Becoming a Literacy Leader: Supporting Learning and Change* by Jennifer Allen (2006). Jennifer has a wonderful voice as a writer and uses it to share relevant, applicable information. It is one of the rare professional books that you can put on your nightstand and read for pleasure and one of three (including this book and *Coaching for Balance*) written by a practicing literacy coach.
3. I strongly recommend Jim Knight’s (2007) *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction*. I include Jim’s book because the “partnership” mentioned in the title is supported throughout the text. Jim Knight’s content consistently aligns with a strengths-based philosophy of working with teachers.

Taking Chapter 1 Personally: How Are You Defining and Clarifying *Your* Role?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What do you believe about literacy coaching, and how do these beliefs translate into your actual practice as a coach?
- How do the understandings you have of your job align with the understandings and expectations of your administrator and your district? How do you know?
- How will you be evaluated? Are your efforts as a coach aligned with the evaluation instrument or process in your school district? How are you documenting this alignment?

Possible Action Steps

- Go online and search “literacy coach job description.” This will give you a selection of job descriptions that you can review. Use these to inform your development of a new job description or to refine or compare with your current one.
- Obtain a copy of your job description. Take a few minutes to reflect on each of the elements of your evaluation instrument. Identify the areas where you need to invest more time and energy.