



# THE LITERACY COACH'S DESK REFERENCE

*Processes and Perspectives for Effective Coaching*

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# 1 Purpose and Overview

**D**o you remember learning to ride a bicycle? You probably recall that it seemed impossible at first, and that the person helping you to learn gave you verbal directions such as, “If you start to fall, turn your front wheel in the direction of the fall.” You may also recall that, mostly, the other person helped you by placing her hand on the back of your bicycle seat, providing steadiness and reassurance as she ran along beside you, ready to catch you if you fell. Learning to ride a bicycle is a complex task—one that can’t be taught in a book but rather has to be tried by getting on a bike and pedaling, hopefully with someone there beside you.

Literacy coaching is similar to riding a bike in some ways. You learn to do it only by doing it. You can’t become a successful literacy coach by reading a book. My current occupation is to serve as a consultant and teacher of literacy coaches, to be like the person who runs alongside the novice bicyclist. I refer to my work as coaching the coach. However, there is only one of me, and there is only a handful of others like me who work as full-time coaches of literacy coaches. Others—university professors, program coordinators, professional development consultants—spend part of their working lives supporting literacy coaches, but there still is not enough assistance. Literacy coaches are looking for more help, and this book is an attempt to provide that help.

Were I to write a book on how to ride a bike, one of the risks would be that I’d make bicycling too piecemeal, by providing a section on pedaling, a section on balancing, and so forth. Riding a bicycle is more holistic than that—once you have mastered it, it is nearly impossible to engage, either mentally or physically, in the separate parts involved in the rather complex act. I run the same risk in writing this book on literacy coaching. Coaching, which is much more complex than riding a bicycle, particularly because it involves working with people, is greater than its parts. Nonetheless, I believe this book will be of use to all of the literacy coaches seeking more assistance.

The phrase “literacy coaching” suggests action, yet most of the literature on the topic is about the content of literacy coaching rather than the process. To compare this approach to coaching with another activity, you could say this would be comparable to writing a book on cooking and telling only about categories of food and varieties of cooking utensils, not about how to chop, dice, simmer, and perform all the other tasks

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necessary for cooking. It is helpful for cooks to know about utensils and food groups, just as it is helpful for literacy coaches to know about literacy instruction and literacy learning. However, one will never become successful as a cook or as a literacy coach with only such knowledge. One must also understand and practice the processes involved.

The comparison between literacy coaching and cooking is apt, too, because one can cook a simple meal with only a little learning but may spend a lifetime refining one's skills as a cook. So, too, a literacy coach might have success with only a little skill and knowledge but could spend a lifetime refining those capacities. An even better comparison might be to driving a car or even performing surgery. It would be impossible—and dangerous—to try to learn such complex tasks in a book, and the author of such a book would no doubt oversimplify these tasks in order to make the book clear. So it is with literacy coaching: I've written a book about it that provides instructions on various processes, but in order to make the processes clear, I've oversimplified them a bit. What I've written about each process is accurate and useful but, when put into action, will be more complex than when described in writing.

This is not a "recipe" book. When I cook, I typically find a recipe that looks interesting, access all the ingredients, and follow the steps to prepare the food. I end up with a passable meal, but nothing more. I tell friends that I can follow recipes, but I'm not a "cook" in the sense that a cook understands how to take ingredients, add herbs and spices, and maximize their potential by preparing them in the most suitable fashion. Such cooking requires more knowledge and skill than I have, but, more than that, it requires decision-making abilities that I lack. I follow recipes; I don't cook.

Literacy coaches who open this book and follow it step-by-step will, in a similar fashion, be able to adequately perform the duties of their job, but they won't be able to "cook" in the sense that they are active decision makers. They won't be taking the ingredients of their situation—teachers, working with students, facing particular challenges or possessing particular interests, in the context of a specific school in a specific community—and working with them as creative decision makers.

So what good is this book? A great deal of good, I hope, as a starting point, as a reminder, and as a reference. This book provides the basic ideas; literacy coaches, as they immerse themselves in their experiences, provide the "spice." I shaped the title, *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference*, after the title of a book that medical doctors use, *The Physician's Desk Reference*. Physicians use their desk reference book to quickly seek information about pharmaceuticals, including effects, side effects, contrain-

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dications, and dosing recommendations. In other words, *The Physician's Desk Reference* is an essential resource to help medical doctors make decisions. I hope *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference* can do the same by helping literacy coaches to make decisions about their work.

Please use this book to remind yourself of important processes to use when coaching. Use it as a review before going into a new or challenging situation or as an opportunity to fine-tune your practices as you reflect upon them. Use it as a decision-making tool, not a recipe book. In other words, use the information, suggestions, and strategies in this book to enrich your perspective as you decide what to do while coaching, not as step-by-step instructions that you must follow to a "T."

### **Organization of This Book**

This book is organized to maximize its usefulness for literacy coaches. This first section provides essential background information about the book but more importantly about literacy coaching. Please read this section first in order to contextualize my understanding of literacy coaching and to provide further perspective on literacy coaching as you read and use the ideas in the rest of the book. In particular, Chapter 2 of this section provides an overview of the different purposes of literacy coaching, the roles literacy coaches might play, and the outcomes of various approaches to literacy coaching. I hope this chapter frames the choices made when a literacy coaching program is developed and implemented, choices that significantly affect the nature and effect of the program. I hope, too, that Chapter 2 enables you to understand the perspective that influences my choices in creating processes for literacy coaching.

The next sections of the book focus on the formats in which literacy coaching most commonly takes place: conferencing with individual teachers, meeting with small groups, providing demonstration lessons, providing services to the entire school, and providing services to individual students. These sections, and the chapters within them, can be read in any order as needed; each stands independently from the others. On the other hand, occasional references in any particular section will build upon other sections, most notably some of the material in the first chapter of Section 3, which provides ideas for using processes in small group meetings that are similar to those used in individual conferences. Although readers can understand all chapters and sections without referring to other chapters or sections, they may want to refer to related material in other parts of the book as well. The book concludes with a chapter that summarizes significant points in the book and makes general suggestions for the field of literacy coaching.

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Each chapter, except for the two in this introductory section and the concluding chapter, follows the same format:

**Overview:** The first page of the chapter provides a brief description of the topic, its purpose, and how it can be implemented, along with questions to think about before, during, and after that process. Black-line masters found later in the chapter are summarized on this page as well. Because users of this book may open it to any chapter, according to their needs, the overview page is provided to help readers “warm up” to the topic at hand. In addition, this page engages the reader with a general approach to coaching practices and perspectives that would be easily evident to someone reading the entire book from front to back but might be missed or forgotten by readers who turn to any individual chapter by itself.

**Discussion:** The topic is then discussed in greater depth, to provide background information, helpful tips, rationales for the processes, and any other suggestions that may be useful.

**Sample Coaching Session:** Chapters will include vignettes providing sample coaching sessions. These vignettes are attempts to bring the ideas in that chapter to life. They are not provided as “scripts” for literacy coaches to memorize and replicate. Literacy coaches tell me repeatedly that it helps them to see and hear what effective literacy coaching is like, and these vignettes will provide an opportunity to do that, albeit in the reader’s imagination. Some of the vignettes, especially those in the earlier chapters, are rather brief and end abruptly, in order to focus readers’ attention on the key point discussed in the chapter. As subsequent chapters present more complex aspects of literacy coaching, the vignettes become longer and more complex. A few chapters in the later sections discuss literacy coaching tasks that cannot be represented easily in vignettes and therefore no vignettes are included.

**Black-Line Masters:** Most chapters will conclude with one or more black-line masters that are provided for easy copying and use. These forms and reference sheets are offered as suggestions, any one of which will be useful to some literacy coaches and not needed by others. A few topics don’t lend themselves to black-line masters, and, therefore, there will be none in those chapters.

I believe readers will find the format of the chapters useful for several reasons. First, it provides an overview to “set the mood” and help the reader prepare for the discussion of the topic. Then a more complex de-

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tailed description of the topic is provided, along with an example. These components should help readers learn and review important literacy coaching processes. In addition, placement of black-line masters within each chapter will make them easily accessible. Finally, the familiar pattern of each chapter will make it easy to refer back to any part of the chapter on any topic.

### **How I Come to This Work**

I found my way to literacy coaching by accident, in the sense that I did not set out to be a literacy coach, much less a coach of coaches. However, looking back, I can see with clarity how I ended up at this point. My teaching experience provided a broad perspective: I taught students in elementary school, middle school, high school, and university levels. My leadership experience strengthened many skills: I served as a reading specialist, curriculum coordinator, school principal, director of research and development, and grant director. My scholarly work furthered my theoretical and research background: I investigated teacher professional development, school reform, theories of power and change, and literacy leadership. And my experiences as a consultant gave me practical tools for making a difference: I worked with teachers and administrators in schools, districts, and regions all over the United States, including rural, small town, urban, and suburban communities.

The overarching goal of my career has been to help schools make sense for the kids and adults who spend their days in them. I served in numerous capacities that had coaching-like duties, including work I did as a teacher leader, reading specialist, principal, and consultant, and more recently, I have served as a coach of coaches. This coaching work always made sense to me, and therefore I hoped it made sense to others, because it started with the concerns of teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches. In addition, it was embedded in “real” work in schools and had the flexibility to take place with individuals or groups of educators. Finally, it brought out the best in all involved: I was able to use my best skills of relationship-building, planning, and knowledge sharing while helping others to use their best skills in observing, assessing, problem solving, and reflecting. Literacy coaching at its best is teaching and learning at their best.

I believe that there is a myth about educators that holds that good teachers have no problems. This myth influences teachers early in their careers, usually when they are still in their undergraduate preparation and thinking about student teaching. Preservice teachers *know* they will

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have problems when they begin teaching, and therefore they are frightened. Later, in their own classrooms, many practicing teachers attempt to hide their problems by closing their classroom doors and rarely talking about teaching in any but the most superficial ways. What these preservice and inservice teachers fail to recognize is that experienced teachers have a lot of problems. In fact, I'd suggest that teaching is *about* problem finding and problem solving. It is the mark of good teachers to struggle but also to admit that struggle, turn to resources for help, and develop a reflective habit of mind that enables them to use all data (broadly defined to include a range of information at hand about students and students' learning) in developing practices and trying to solve problems.

You can probably see why literacy coaching makes sense to me. Literacy coaches are superbly positioned to support teachers as problem solvers. For those teachers unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with conceptualizing themselves as people who have problems and work to solve them, literacy coaches provide gentle support in discovering this reality. For those teachers comfortable with problem finding and problem solving, literacy coaches are trusted colleagues who share parts of the journey, traveling alongside teachers as they do the difficult and rewarding work of wrestling with the dilemmas that will always arise. Moreover, literacy coaches support teachers in developing strengths necessary not only for addressing any current problem but also for preventing future problems and therefore achieving more success. Coaches do this when they work alongside teachers to pursue topics of interest.

All of this talk about problems may leave readers thinking that my approach to literacy coaching coincides with the current trend of teacher bashing. It is hard to open a newspaper today without finding some supposed evidence of the failure, laziness, or lack of caring of teachers. This latest round of attacks upon teachers began in 1983 with the Reagan administration's publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and has ebbed and flowed in the years since, particularly as certain politically-driven movements have captured the attention of the media and the public. Thus, as additional well-publicized reports have been issued, as presidential initiatives have been promoted, and as selective research has received attention, teachers have been blamed for myriad faults. In this vein, literacy coaching might seem like the "cure" for ineffective teaching, and some educators and policymakers do see coaching that way.

For me, though, literacy coaching is not about broken teachers but about teacher strengths. I describe the work of literacy coaches as "help-

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ing teachers to identify their strengths, ‘grow’ those strengths, and develop new strengths” (Toll, 2005, p. 5). This focus on strengths is not a Pollyanna-like optimism, blinded by reality. Rather, it reflects my twenty-five-plus years working with teachers and defining myself through it all as, first, a teacher. I know that every teacher has strengths and every teacher is successful in some ways. Moreover, I know that the trend in teacher bashing is politically motivated and reflects the use of certain “lenses” that enable the viewer to see teaching in a preordained way. For instance, there are those who use their particular perspectives to see schools as bastions of iniquity because they attempt to provide an education to all students, no matter the students’ apparently innate capacities. These individuals would rather that schools spend a good deal of time and money on the more “gifted” students and less on those with less “potential” (Shannon, 1998). My use of quotation marks probably cues you in to the fact that I disagree with this perspective. However, it is found in certain circles, not least those groups who would like school vouchers to enable some parents to send their children to some publicly-paid-for schools that deny admittance to apparently less-capable students (Spring, 1997).

Given that each perspective on schools and teaching has a political component (yes, even mine), each perspective on literacy coaching has a political component as well. I feel some concern that this book reflects a rather limited view of teaching and coaching. For instance, the educator and theorist Alan Luke (1995) has illustrated that the emphasis placed on strategies-and-skills-for-understanding in most reading instruction today, which he places in categories of coding competence and semantic competence, encompasses only about one-quarter to one-half of the possible literacy work that could be done in schools. I wish that the schools in which literacy coaches worked exemplified this insight by going beyond that limited scope to what Luke refers to as pragmatic and critical competences, but they rarely do. Therefore, the examples of literacy instruction that I provide in this book are drawn from instruction that focuses mainly on strategies and skills for understanding. I want this book to resonate with readers and to provide examples that seem “real” to them; as a result of my interest in writing about “what is,” though, I fail to write about “what could be” in literacy instruction.

In addition, the processes of literacy coaching described and exemplified herein imply that there are logical steps to get from point A to point B and that these steps are always the same. But literacy coaching, like any other complex work, isn’t that simple. However, I rely primarily on language to address literacy coaching practices and perspectives,

and language that is sequential and explicit seems the best way to write this book. Perhaps a better author could write poems or draw sketches to explain the complex, rich, and sometimes intuitive aspects of literacy coaching, but I lack those skills. I trust that readers of this book are smart enough to know that breaking processes into steps is a good way to describe them, but that few processes are as simple as those descriptions.

To provide further insight into possible ways in which literacy coaching could be thought about and written about, in Chapter 2 I'll provide an overview of various models of literacy coaching and the perspectives they reflect. In this way, readers will be able to better understand various approaches to literacy coaching and will see why I make many of the choices that I do as a literacy coach and coach of coaches.

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This indispensable guide offers current and prospective literacy coaches practical strategies for effectively meeting the day-to-day challenges of job-embedded professional development.

Cathy A. Toll, an educator with over 15 years of coaching experience, provides guidance on all aspects of literacy coaching, including:

- conferencing with individual teachers
- facilitating group meetings
- providing demonstration lessons
- providing services to the entire school
- providing services to students

Toll demonstrates what effective literacy coaching looks like through key questions, theoretical and practical rationales, copy-ready masters, and vignettes of real-life coaching conversations. Appendixes on minimizing the negative impact of mandated classroom observations and separating coaching from supervising, plus an annotated bibliography, make this the ideal desk reference for coaches, supervisors, trainers, and others supporting the work of literacy coaches.

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