

## Citation

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### Coaches Coaching Coaches

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Literacy Coach 1: *Then you said, "What are your next steps?" That was depressing when he said, "Come up with the next phonics worksheet to continue the decoding practice." He didn't talk anything about...*

Literacy Coach 2: *He totally didn't get, he totally didn't see it...*

We had just met with a teacher for a post-observation conference, using a "Reflective Conversation Protocol" (National Staff Development Council, 2006) as a guide for engaging in dialogue about the guided reading lesson we observed earlier that day. As we, two literacy coaches, sat down afterward to discuss how Jan's coaching went, Scott helped Jan reflect on the decisions and moves she had made in her conversation with the teacher. We were fortunate to have the opportunity as coaches to coach each other so that we could grow as professionals. In this paper, we explore the need for, and provide an example of, one possibility for literacy coaches to develop their professional expertise.

### **Need for Professional Development for Coaches**

Literacy coaches in some districts, with support of the school and district administration, have established their own professional learning communities. However, systematicity in furthering the professional development of literacy coaches overall seems to be limited. More often than not, literacy coaches find themselves in isolated roles, with few strategic professional learning opportunities designed to support them. The International Reading Association (2004) expresses concern for the lack of professional training available to literacy coaches:

Reading coaching is a powerful intervention with great potential; however, that potential will be unfulfilled if reading coaches do not have sufficient depth of knowledge and range of skills to perform adequately in the coaching role. Education reform is riddled with examples of potentially powerful interventions that disappoint reformers and fail the students they are intended to help. (n.p.)

This shortage of professional learning support may mean that literacy coaches must go about searching out their own professional learning opportunities, or coaches may neglect their own professional learning altogether.

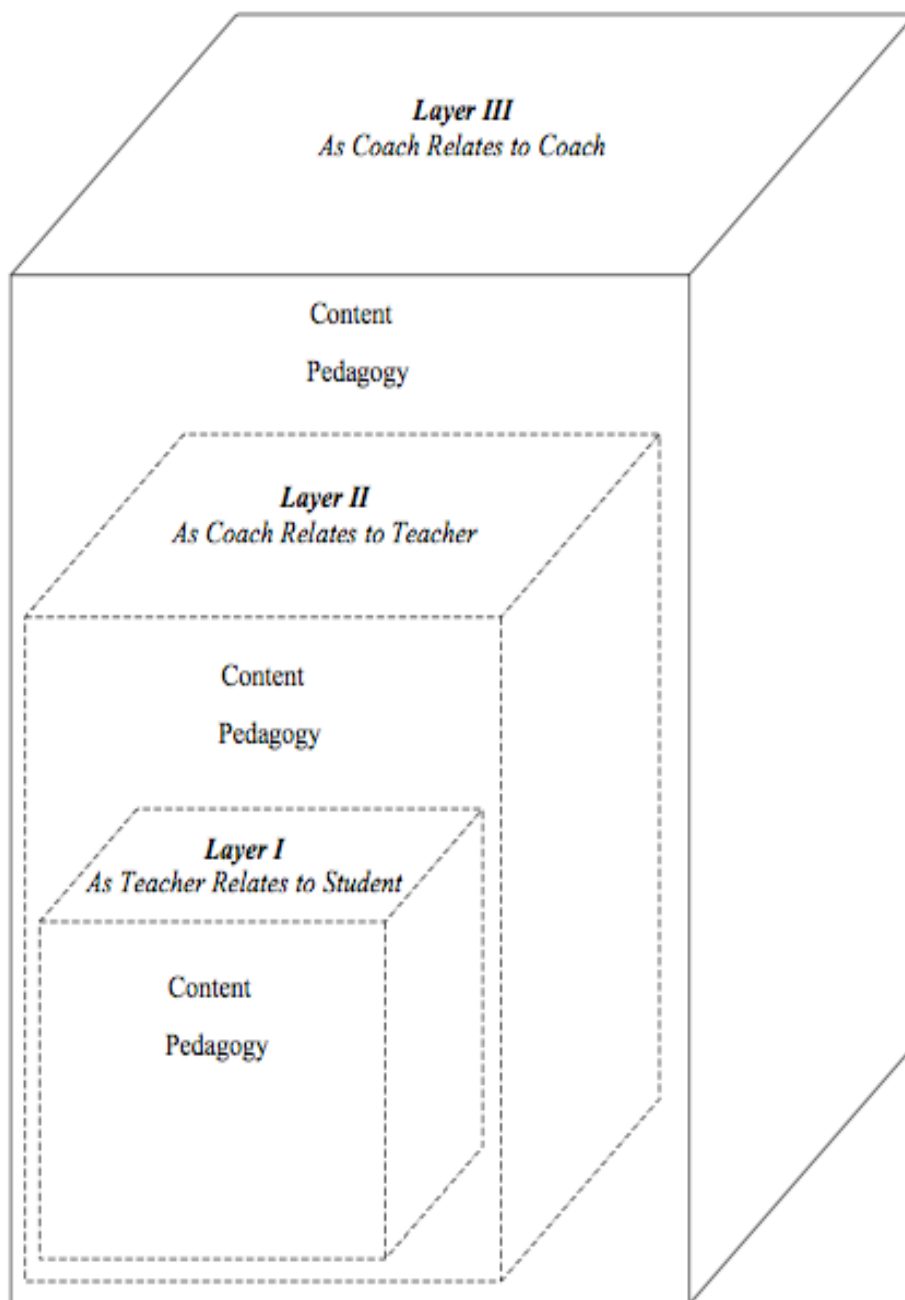
Because the school district within which we work has been committed to providing a variety of structures that support our professional growth, we have come to appreciate versions of professional learning uniquely developed to fit the context of literacy coaching. In addition to taking advantage of the opportunities the district has provided, such as book studies, weekly meetings of our learning community, and the support of a visiting consultant, we have created other opportunities for ourselves to develop professionally, designing our own “learning to learn” structures (Joyce & Showers, 2002, p. 90).

It is our assumption that professional learning is not simply a workshop we attend, but something we live daily within the walls of our schools and in the classrooms of the teachers with whom we work. Within the context of our job as coaches, one possibility for our professional learning is entering into dialogue and inquiry with other coaches. As Joyce and Showers (2002) tell us, “Regular, structured interaction between or among peers over substantive content is one of the hallmarks of a profession and is viewed by other professionals as essential professional nourishment” (p.82).

Understanding the need for *in situ* professional learning opportunities, the question we explore in this paper is this: if job-embedded professional learning is the most valuable model for *teachers* (Joyce & Showers, 2002), how can *literacy coaches* provide for themselves comparable, contextualized professional learning? In the following pages we present a strategy, the Coach-to-Coach Cycle. We recognize that the model we describe is one of many possibilities for literacy coaches pursuing professional development; however, we hope that the minimal support necessary for implementing the Coach-to-Coach Cycle will make it accessible for literacy coaches. As we describe the approach we used, we explore a conceptual framework and the complexities it presents within literacy coaching.

### **Layers of Coaching Expertise**

One of the biggest obstacles to new literacy coaches and to districts hiring them is how to support the professional development of the coach. School- and/or district-level limitations in helping literacy coaches effectively grow as professionals may arise from the fact that literacy coaching involves multiple layers of expertise with content and pedagogy (See *Figure 1*).



**Figure 1:** Layers of Relating for Coaches

***Layer I: As Teacher Relates to Student***

Many, if not most, literacy coaches have been hired or recruited because previously they were successful classroom teachers. Thus, one layer of expertise for coaches occurs at the layer of teaching students. While coaches may or may not work directly with children, it is necessary for them to be proficient at this level of expertise. Coaches must be qualified to make sound instructional decisions in order to support teachers as they teach their students.

Taking a Vygotskian and Freirean perspective, we argue that learning is socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1962) through inquiry and dialogue (Freire, 1970/2005). Rather than adopting a banking approach to teaching and learning, whereby the teacher deposits knowledge into the students, we view education as an action-reflection cycle, where the educator “constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970/2005, pp. 80-81).

In our experience, as we will show later in this paper through snippets of Layer III discussions we have had with each other, the more we position ourselves as both teacher *and* learner, as co-inquirers, co-investigators, co-learners, and co-teachers in open dialogue with one another, the more successful our coaching experiences will be at all layers. A didactic or banking approach impairs trust, often resulting in teachers’ mimicking or parroting what they think coaches want to hear and see in their classrooms, at least in our presence. Dialogue requires love (a commitment to others), humility, and faith in humankind. According to Freire (1970/2005), these are necessary ingredients in true dialogue, ingredients which build trust: “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p.91). If education, including coaching, is to prepare learners for participation in a democracy, we feel that dialogue is a means toward this end.

At the Teacher-Student Layer, literacy coaches must possess both the content knowledge and the pedagogical skill to teach students, including the ability to co-inquire, dialogue, and reflect with learners, making instructional decisions based on the ongoing collaboration in the classroom.

***Layer II: As Coach Relates to Teacher***

Being a successful teacher, while necessary, is an insufficient prerequisite to coaching. As Robinson et al. (2005) state, “Just as great athletes don’t always make great team coaches, great teachers don’t necessarily make great literacy coaches” (p.60). Thus, successful coaches require additional layers of expertise.

In addition to understanding content and pedagogy at a Teacher-Student Layer, coaches must know and understand the subject matter of coaching adults. This includes content such as educational change, adult education, learning styles, professional learning communities, communication and relationship-building, etc. If literacy leaders such as reading specialists move into literacy coaching positions, they may possess strong knowledge of English Language Arts and literacy instruction but lack sufficient understanding of coaching adults. Literacy coaches need to be able to apply pedagogically their knowledge of how adults learn and use effective change strategies, while at the same time maintaining the reflective stance of dialogue and inquiry as they work with teachers, their co-learners.

### ***Layer III: As Coach Relates to Coach***

At this layer, in addition to the expertise described on the previous two layers, the literacy coach offers support to, and is supported by, other coaches. The content and pedagogy at this layer are very similar to those at the Coach-Teacher Layer; the facilitating coach takes a dialogical, inquiry stance of co-learner and applies the same understanding of adult learning and school change as when working with teachers. What differentiates this layer from that of the Coach-Teacher is that the Coach-Coach relationship maintains a “historical” view across the relationships subsumed within the model. That is, a literacy coach is at once considering a context through the lens of past experiences as a teacher.

One analogy is that of Russian nesting dolls. Each successive doll subsumes, but still contains, the previous doll. When one coach coaches another, all three layers—Teacher-Student, Coach-Teacher, and Coach-Coach—operate simultaneously, and the coach must shift appropriately between the layers. Such shifting demands sophisticated, meta-level thinking and practice. Given the complexity of the role of a literacy coach, operating at three simultaneous levels of meta-awareness, for instance, there is a strong need for professional learning for literacy coaches. We hope to offer one possibility of professional learning that may address this need.

### **Terminology**

For purposes of this paper, we use the term Home Coach when we are referring to the coach working with the teacher (Layer II). We use the term Guest Coach when referring to the literacy coach who is coaching another literacy coach (Layer III). We chose these terms because they distinguish the two for purposes of conversation but do not indicate a hierarchy.

### **The Role of Reflection in Professional Growth**

Reflection is the cornerstone of the Coach-to-Coach Cycle. Only coaches who are willing to honestly examine their practices through dialogue with a colleague will benefit from this process. Alterio (2004) writes that reflection is “intended to raise consciousness, to challenge complacency, and to engender a higher order of professional practice” (p.5). Such lofty goals are not achieved without honesty and commitment from the participants. These goals reach beyond the rote implementation of a practice; rather “reflective practitioners are those who use experiences as opportunities to consider *both* [italics added] their philosophy and their practice” (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005, p.214).

However, there are limitations to reflection. Webb (2001) asserts that “reflection as a process of thinking alone does not account for the beliefs and biases that guide the thinking in the first place” (p.246). Thus, the most beneficial reflection is in conjunction with an “other” who might question one’s beliefs and thinking. Co-reflection serves as a means to interrogate our beliefs about teaching and learning. Webb continues, “It is important to stress how reflection is implicated with the same attitudes it is attempting to uncover.” Thus, reflection that is dialogic in nature serves as a counterpoint to the biases that inform self-reflection. Such dialogic reflection creates “knowledge-building partnerships” (Robb, 2000, p.52) and positions coaches to engage in deeper thinking and experience more professional growth.

While reflection is a habitual practice for both of us, our memories of conversations with teachers are imprecise, registered as fragments and biased by our own experiences and preconceptions. Furthermore, our reflections of these conversations are narrowed by our personal ideologies and our limited capacities for seeing beyond what we already know. As such, for the purposes of this article, we took measures to record and collect our reflections. By scripting each other's conversations with teachers and by recording our conversations with each other, we then had more accurate and objective records to support our reflection.

### **Context of Our Work**

#### ***Coaches***

Scott is a district-level elementary instructional coach, a position which includes literacy coaching, whose time is split evenly between two schools. He supports teachers in grades K-5 in multiple subjects. Jan is a school-based literacy coach working in one elementary school in K-5 language arts. We have been working together and collaborating for over two years. We coached at the same school during the 2005-2006 school year, and we have participated in weekly district-level professional learning sessions over a two-year period.

#### ***Assumptions***

We approached this work recognizing that our efforts to coach each other would need to parallel our efforts in coaching teachers. As with teachers, we wanted to engage in dialogic, reflective practice with each other. As we coached each other, we remained sensitive to the vulnerability of the Home Coach. The Home Coach and the Guest Coach must establish together norms of respect, confidentiality, and trust for the coaching relationship to prove productive. As we have worked together for a while now, we did not formally have to establish norms of collegiality. However, we recommend that coaches who are relatively new at working with each other negotiate boundaries and expectations for the working relationship. For example, should the Guest Coach remain silent during the conferences with the teacher, or is the Home Coach comfortable with interventions “on-the-run”? Does the Home Coach expect the Guest Coach to limit feedback to areas related to the Home Coach's goals, or is the realm of feedback open to anything from the Guest Coach? Are there protocols that either coach wants to follow?

Within this locus of trust are many elements. Among those is the goodwill assumption that the Home Coach both wants to improve and makes decisions about interactions with teachers from a similar goodwill stance—a stance of commitment to others and faith in humanity. Similarly, the Home Coach must assume goodwill of the facilitating coach and understand that the Guest Coach has engaged in this exchange with a commitment to help the Home Coach take risks and grow, possibly even causing some discomfort. Our “comfort” with each other allowed us to challenge each other's assumptions, question some closely held beliefs, and raise each other's consciousness in ways that may have aroused defensiveness had we not been working within the context of a safe, established relationship. Burkins (2007) writes:

The assumption of goodwill goes beyond simply believing that everyone is operating from only the purest of motives; it is a matter of giving people room to be authentic. This means operating from the stance that they aren't necessarily wrong, and you aren't necessarily right.(p.79)

Thus, we had to respect that we could have differing opinions.

Having a pre-existing, strong professional relationship served us in two ways that could be interpreted as competing. It reduced the risk associated with being observed and coached because we each trusted that each would take care of the other emotionally. On the other hand, it gave us the security to push each other harder than we might have allowed with someone with whom we did not have an established relationship. Our foundations of respect for each other gave us the necessary room to ask each other hard questions and push each other's thinking around issues with which we had grown comfortable.

We were able purposefully to pursue lines of argument with each other, in efforts to help each other expand our theoretical understandings and shift our practice. Establishing trust from the start allowed us to enter into dialogue, a space contingent upon humility and openness (Freire, 1970/2005; Freire, 1998). Our goal with one another was to help the other person "reflect on a lesson and use their reflections to celebrate what worked, then identify an area that requires more thought, dialogue, and research" (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, p. 61).

With each other and in our individual coaching settings, we ascribe to a holistic view of learning, where our understandings of each other as friends and colleagues informed our interactions. Furthermore, our understanding each other's goals and struggles within coaching supported our efforts to scaffold each other through an honest, positive, reflective professional growth process.

### **The Coach-to-Coach Cycle**

While participating in one of our district's professional learning opportunities, our coaching consultant asked us to script each other's dialogue during a coaching conference. Typically, we follow a process adapted from the clinical supervision model (Goldhammer, 1969; see also, Barkley, 2005; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). This model includes a pre-observation conference with a teacher, an observation of that teacher, and post-observation conference with the teacher. In an effort to make the most of our professional learning time, and understanding that we could be powerful sources of professional growth for each other, we decided to add the additional components of meeting with each other before each phase of conferencing with and observing the teacher. Thus the pre-/post-observation conference structure which supports the teacher was sandwiched between layers of pre-/post-observation conferences to support the coach. We have labeled this structure The Coach-to-Coach Cycle and have illustrated it in Table 1. While The Coach-to-Coach Cycle in Table 1 may appear linear, we envision this process as one of *praxis* (Freire, 1970/2005), an action-reflection cycle that begins anew after Step 8.

Table 1: The Coach-to-Coach Cycle

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Guest Coach</b>	<b>Home Coach</b>	<b>Classroom Teacher</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
1. Prior to pre-observation conference	Engages in dialogue and gathers information; documents coaching goals of the Home Coach	Engages in dialogue and articulates goals both as a coach and specifically for the pre-observation conference	Not present	To organize thoughts and plan upcoming Coach-Teacher conference
2. Pre-observation conference	Observes and scripts the Home Coach's interaction with the teacher	Engages in dialogue with teacher; gathers information about teacher's goals for the lesson and observation	Engages in dialogue with coach; articulates goals for the lesson and observation	To establish purposes for classroom visit
3. After pre-observation conference/ Before observation	Engages in dialogue; shares notes from pre-conference, particularly those related to literacy coach's goals; may share insights on teacher's goals	Engages in dialogue; reflects on pre-observation conference as it relates to professional goals; clarifies priorities for observation	Not present	To reflect on pre-observation conference as it relates to observation
4. Classroom visit	Observes instruction, takes notes, and scripts teacher-student interactions	Observes instruction, takes notes, and scripts teacher-student interactions	Teaches lesson	To gather anecdotal notes for reflection



Meeting	Guest Coach	Home Coach	Classroom Teacher	Purpose
5. Analysis and interpretation	Analyze and dialogue about observational data (notes and transcript). Help Home Coach set goals for post-observation conference with teacher.	Analyze and dialogue about observational data (notes and transcript). Set goals for post-observation conference with teacher.	Not present	To reflect on notes from classroom visit as they relate to the goals of the teacher and the Home Coach.
6. Post-observation conference	Observe Home Coach-Teacher interactions. Script Home Coach's words.	Engage in dialogue with Reflect on observation as relates to teacher's professional learning goals.	Participate in post-conference. Reflect on observation as relates goals.	Document Home Coach's work related to specific goals.
7. After post-observation conference	Reflect on post-conference. Review notes related to the Home Coach's professional goals.	Reflect on post-conference in relation to goals of coach and teacher.	Not present.	Reflect on previous action in order to inform next Coach-to-Coach Cycle, set new goals for work with the teacher and for the Home Coach in general.
8. After entire cycle	Debrief process and plan next cycle	Debrief process and plan next cycle	Not present	Reflect on process and plan to start next Cycle.

### Discussion

We took turns in the role of the Guest Coach. For example, first Jan (Home Coach) coached a teacher in her own school while Scott (Guest Coach) coached Jan. Then Jan (Guest Coach) came to Scott's school and coached him (Home Coach) as he coached a teacher there. The excerpts of the transcript that follow are portions of our conversation (Step 7 in The Coach-to-Coach Cycle) after Jan's post-observation conference with the teacher, who taught 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at the time whom we observed during guided reading. For each conclusion we drew, we offered an excerpt to support our discussion.

***Perceptions of Success or Failure***

Generally, Jan did not feel that the coaching episode was productive in that the teacher did not reach the level of understanding that Jan had hoped to support. In stepping back and examining the transcripts, and then in reflecting on Jan and Scott’s discussions of the transcripts, Jan benefited from valuable learning that would not have presented itself in a more “successful” coaching experience. Admiral, Veen, Korthage, Lockhorst, and Wubbels (1999) write:

An episode where one has the feeling of not having succeeded or of having come up short may be necessary in order to dwell on the episode and use it as a stepping stone to further development. One seldom pauses to reflect on the successes. (p.78)

In reflecting on the coaching episode, both Jan and Scott came to a several new understandings. We use text boxes to illustrate examples of our actual dialogue during Step 7 of the Coach-to-Coach Cycle.

Jan: Well, that didn’t go as I had hoped.  
 Scott: Oh, yeah? What do you mean?  
 Jan: Well, I just wanted him to connect that there was a relationship between the fact that the students weren’t getting it and the way he was teaching it. I’m not sure he got anything out of this process.  
 Scott: Well, he was pretty reflective. But let’s take a look at our notes.  
 Jan: Alright.

***Clarity of Language***

Jan saw once again how clarity in language can influence the response from a teacher. Jan has been analyzing and considering her language in coaching for some time, but the challenges of making language choices on the run were illustrated in her conference with the teacher. When Scott pointed out that if her question had been more about connecting what the teacher was doing with what the students were learning, and how the students’ learning informed the teacher’s instruction, it demonstrated to Jan that we often get what we ask for in coaching conferences.

Scott: And then, you were about to create your own entry point, but the media specialist came in. You said, “I want to go back to your kids and your teaching...” as she came in to get a book or something. The teacher didn’t hear the end of your sentence. And then, after the media specialist left, you asked, “What did you learn today?” And he said, “The kids still don’t know how to apply phonics to figuring out words.”  
 Jan: What he learned was that they “still don’t know how to apply phonics,” not that this lack of transfer to independent reading might be related to his teaching. I kept trying to get him to see how his teaching was influencing what his students were doing.  
 Scott: And maybe, if you had phrased that question, like, “What did you learn about your own practice?...” Even this question (*refers to last question in Reflective Conversation Protocol (NSDC, 2006), which asks, “What learning will you take away from this lesson that you will apply to a future lesson?”*) wouldn’t have gotten it, though, because he still focused on...  
 Jan: Their reading behaviors...

Scott: Not what did you learn about *the kids*; what did you learn about *your teaching*?  
 Jan: Right.

### ***Teaching Points***

We are coming to realize that rather than playing the role of the “more expert other” (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001), which can inhibit trust and dialogue in the Freirean sense, it is more appropriate for the coach to give the teacher information about what the coach observed and let the teacher decide what to do with the information. Coaches may co-inquire into possible options for the teacher to try out, but ultimately the teacher is in the driver’s seat. Instead of seeing the post-observation conference as a time for the coach to make suggestions or enumerate teaching points, we view dialogical coaching as a conversation, a give and take between two co-learners engaged in inquiry. Some researchers and writers have abandoned a focus on the coach’s giving feedback. For example, Joyce and Showers (2002) “omitted feedback as a coaching component” in part because “peer coaches told us they found themselves slipping into ‘supervisory, evaluative comments’ despite all their intentions to avoid them” (pp. 88-89). Avoiding slipping into a banking approach to coaching often proves extremely difficult, even after years of training and working as a coach, as the following two examples illustrate.

Scott: You said, “One thing you might think about: their on-task behaviors were higher at their desks and centers. When they were at the guided reading table, they had to finish their paper and get you to check it before they could read their book.” Then you gave him a suggestion.  
 Jan: Yes, I suggested that he let them start reading from their guided reading book as soon as they finished the paper or that they let the paper be at one of the centers. Then he could just go around and check them later. That way they wouldn’t be waiting for him or losing valuable reading practice time.

Jan: I was trying to get him here. I said, “You said you started the phonics practice in guided reading to get them to transfer decoding skills into their independent reading. But now you still feel like they’re not getting it.” I was trying to get him to realize it wasn’t working. That the heavy focus on decoding was actually interfering with their reading.  
 Scott: Right, because he had earlier said, “They were successful today because I prompted them.” Didn’t he say that? Did he say anything about how he still didn’t feel like they...well he said that in his pre-conference, that they weren’t transferring.

### ***External Factors***

Many factors external to this Coach-Teacher relationship contributed to what we perceived as the teacher’s limited willingness to hear what Jan was saying. In our district, the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law No. 107-110) has resulted in increased standardization of instruction, with a corresponding decrease in autonomy for teachers, particularly when it comes to making instructional decisions. For example, we have noticed in many teachers—particularly teachers with strong literacy practices—a tension between increasing student test scores and the ability to act as professionals. We have both observed ways in which this tension has affected this particular teacher during the past two years, and some of

the tension showed up in our observation when he seemingly abandoned his former practice of using real texts and authentic experiences with his students, replacing them instead with decontextualized phonics worksheets.

Scott: That's true. Okay. I was wondering where you got this from (*pointing to notes*). But now that makes sense. And then you said, "But now you still feel like they're not getting it." And that's where he said, "But I enjoy teaching it." You know.

Jan: That gave me some insight into his thinking. It was a little frustrating.

Scott: I wonder if you had probed more about what he enjoys about it... Is he enjoying the fact that he is doing direct skills instruction and hoping that that will increase test scores? Is that what he enjoys about it? Is he enjoying it because it is something that *he* developed to solve a problem, that *he* made up and that's not from a book, a coach, or another teacher, you know? Is that his only level of autonomy in the classroom because of No Child Left Behind that he feels like he still can own—that one thing? You know what I mean?

### ***The Challenges of Dialogue***

For Jan, the biggest learning point was when, in a reflective conversation with Scott, she realized that she critiqued teachers' behavior toward their students, while her own behavior as a coach toward the teacher functioned the exact same way. Jan had expressed frustration because she had tried to help the teacher see that his instructional decisions might be playing a role in the students' failure to transfer the information. However, when Scott and Jan talked about how the teacher did not understand the "big idea" that Jan was trying to communicate, Scott and Jan both placed responsibility on the teacher, saying things like, "That was depressing" and "He just didn't get it." Both of us felt we did not take ownership for the misunderstanding of the teacher during the debriefing of the post-observation conference. It was only in further reflection that Jan realized that she was attributing blame to the learner in the same way as teachers sometimes do with students.

Scott: Then you said, "What are your next steps?" That was depressing when he said, "Come up with the next phonics worksheet to continue the decoding practice." He didn't talk anything about...

Jan: He totally didn't get, he totally didn't see it...

### ***Hearing Them Say What We Want to Hear***

A second observation that Jan made was that she had missed the shift in the teacher's body language and attention that Scott had pointed out after the post-observation conference. After identifying this shift, we both viewed the responses of the teacher through a different lens. The question arose, should Jan have wrapped up the conference once the teacher had removed his investment in it? If Jan had noticed this shift during the conference, what would she have done differently? Jan felt that she was so absorbed in the point she was trying to make with the teacher that she lost touch with where that teacher was. The conference began to be about what Jan wanted the teacher to understand rather than about where the teacher was at that point.

Trying to maintain this precarious balance in a dialogue often proves extremely difficult. Our overall goal is to help present a different perspective and allow teachers/learners a chance to reflect on their practice. In a coaching dialogue, ideas flow bi-directionally, and they are often quite complex. It is easier, in retrospect, to trace possible connections between what the coach says and what the teacher says in response—and vice versa, particularly if we have accurate notes that capture the dialogue during the post-observation conference. Our Coach-to-Coach Cycle in this situation gave us the opportunity to examine critical variables in the post-observation conference that may have led to different outcomes in what the teacher transfers back to his classroom practice.

<p>Scott: But, also I'm wondering if that was related to, I don't know, at some point...I wonder if I wrote it down (<i>flips back a page</i>). Here. "Tone shift in teacher." It was here that it felt like he had given up in this conference.</p> <p>Jan: Hmm... Like he was just going to start...</p> <p>Scott: It was right when you laid it out about the students' behaviors.</p> <p>Jan: And that was when he just...</p> <p>Scott: That's when he became defensive and started to feel like, I don't know, I could tell that through his body language and his tone of voice ...</p> <p>Jan: There was a change.</p> <p>Scott: ...and then, you know what I mean.</p> <p>Jan: Uh-huh. Like at that point. He was just going through the motions.</p> <p>Scott: And so then, after you suggested the checklist, it didn't come up in his list of next steps as one of the options.</p> <p>Jan: No, and it didn't, um...He just, he just, he was just, like at this point he started just...</p> <p>Scott: Saying what you wanted to hear.</p> <p>Jan: ...saying what I wanted to hear, what <i>he</i> thought I wanted to hear.</p>
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### ***Mutual Trust Between Coaches***

In this post-observation conference, Jan found herself guilty of behaviors against which she has actively worked. The idea of working to make changes in classrooms with teachers rather than in spite of teachers is not a new one to Jan. However, understanding such an idea intellectually and acting on it practically are quite different. This took sincere scrutiny and would not have been possible had Jan not been comfortable working with Scott and secure in the knowledge that he would not think she was a "bad" coach.

Even though Jan's post-observation conference with the teacher felt unsuccessful to some degree, Scott came away from this experience with a greater understanding of the dialogic nature of literacy coaching. One measure of the success of literacy coaching is the extent to which the participants come out of the dialogue with new learning and a willingness to act upon the new learning to improve their practice. While we cannot attest to the teacher's new learning (at Layer II), we can certainly vouch for our own (at Layer III). Scott felt that Jan's humility and openness to dialogue with him during the debrief provided a rich opportunity to examine critical points in the post-observation conference. As Jan noted, we were able to identify a few crucial places where the coaching conversation was not true dialogue, where each party was not really hearing what the other was saying. Our reflections have already changed our coaching as we have moved

into Step 8 of the Coach-to-Coach Cycle and are starting the cycle over. This would not have been possible if *our* dialogue were not successful and built upon mutual trust.

Scott: Then you said, "What kind of support do you need from me?"  
Jan: He said, "It has been very helpful to have you help me think through the questions." Then I said, "Do you want me to come back next week at this time?" He said, "Yes."  
Scott: Of course he did.  
Jan: I guess your notes say that was "closed-ended."  
Scott: I mean, can he say "No?" No!  
(Laughter.)  
Jan: He could have said no...but, (pause) oh...you're right.

### Implications

First, based on the amount of learning we experienced in this process and the relative ease of implementation, the Coach-to-Coach Cycle holds promise for literacy coaches who are seeking to promote their own professional learning. While this process is not without costs and requires a supportive principal and/or school district, the prerequisites for putting in place are less than more formal models for professional learning. However, as we mentioned before, we found this process as valuable as/more valuable than any other professional experience we have had as coaches. Perhaps this is because it grew from our individual contexts and was differentiated to meet our specific learning needs.

Secondly, peer observations among coaches have potential as a vehicle for colleagues to support each other's growth in ways that other professional development opportunities cannot afford. The Coach-to-Coach Cycle gives literacy coaches an opportunity to step into the coachee's role, which serves both to offer opportunities for reflection that can result in changes in practice but can also--even more importantly--help literacy coaches develop an empathetic stance toward those they coach.

A third benefit of this work is that of making connections between coaches. Education is an isolating field and, while teachers deal with the dangers of isolationism, many literacy coaches are even more isolated, particularly in terms of professional support. The Coach-to-Coach Cycle is one reflective methodology through which coaches can connect across disciplines. It holds promise, for instance, for a math coach and a literacy coach working in the same school or for literacy coaches working across town.

Fourthly, working through the Coach-to-Coach Cycle sets in place structures that support learning to learn. Joyce and Showers (2002) write of this phenomenon and have found that schools where such structures are in place develop a learning community where educators are more successful in other types of professional learning experiences. In other words, by learning how to learn, coaches may be set up for more success as they encounter other learning opportunities within coaching. "From a career perspective, it may be that learning how to acquire good practices should be equally as important as the good practices themselves" (p.94).

Finally, coaching in a reflective and dialogical manner supports a vision of education that fosters "a society that is less unjust, less cruel, more democratic, less discriminatory, less racist, less sexist" (Freire, 1992, p. 115). Literacy coaches have the ability to effect change at multiple layers, creating vast implications for the shape of literacy education, from the way coaches and teachers relate to one another to helping students become truly literate to effecting large scale

change as more and more students and teachers become active agents in charge of their own learning and growth.

On a personal note, we have valued this opportunity to engage in inquiry that has strengthened our personal and professional relationships. While there is much in the literacy coaching and professional development literature about “job-embedded” professional learning for *teachers*, there is little or no corresponding literature on job-embedded professional learning for *literacy coaches*. Yet, we learned more about coaching teachers through this process than we have learned in nearly every other professional development opportunity we have had (and we have had plenty). Joyce and Showers (1981, 1988, 2002) present peer coaching as the most effective type of professional development in transferring learned skills to an educator’s practice. For us, having a critical friend and colleague to participate in the entire Coaching Cycle allowed us to dialogue and reflect on the experience with a level of specificity and contextualization not available via other means of professional learning. Furthermore, as a result of this process, we feel a greater sense of agency in fostering *our* own growth as professional literacy coaches and have concrete plans to expand our use of the Coach-to-Coach Cycle in years to come.

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