CHAPTER 1

Literacy Coaching in a Learning Community
The way that we see things today does not have to be the way we saw them yesterday. That is because the situations, our relationships to them, and we ourselves have changed. . . .

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Literacy coaches rally around teachers, supporting their learning and development. Yet, they also challenge teachers to transform their instruction to enhance student learning. They ignite teacher learning by generating queries and challenging accepted wisdom, which encourages teachers to examine their instructional practices and views. As a result, literacy coaches become a catalyst for changing practices, beliefs, and values about literacy and literacy instruction. Thus, literacy coaching is a critical way to advance teachers’ knowledge of literacy practices and student learning.

Coaching is certainly not a new concept. The sports arena has always had coaches who supported individuals as they practiced. Coaches like Earl Woods and Hank Haney supported Tiger Woods as he improved his golf swing. These coaches, as well as others, often modeled how to swing a golf club as they said, “Watch how I do it.” They might have made suggestions for improvement by supporting what Tiger was doing and demonstrating slight adjustments. Literacy coaching includes many of the same characteristics. It involves collaboration and support for making instructional adjustments that lead to improved student learning.
Literacy coaching in the classroom is a process in which the coaches support teachers as they instruct their students. This is a very personal process that occurs as teachers and literacy coaches work together in the classroom. After teaching, literacy coaches and teachers reflect on student learning and the classroom interactions that produced this learning. They share their perceptions of the teachers’ instructional practices and knowledge of literacy instruction. This book is designed to help literacy coaches and teachers work together in classrooms to improve student learning.

Models and Characteristics

There are many models for coaching literacy. Some focus on cognitive aspects, others focus on the collaborative nature of learning, and still others focus on coaching as professional development. This book draws heavily on three models of coaching. In the cognitive coaching model (Costas and Garmston, 2002), coaching is a nonjudgmental process in which a teacher’s actions are a result of in-depth thinking and analysis. It focuses on the actions of the individual teacher and the subsequent thinking and analysis by the coach. A three-year study of cognitive coaching showed student scores improved on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in the coaching schools compared to control schools (Grinder, 1996). The study also showed that teachers engaged in cognitive coaching made fewer recommendations for special education placement.

Another approach, the Boston Collaborative Coaching and Learning project (CCL), has been successful in enabling teachers to use an instructional process in secondary schools (Sturtevant, 2003). In this model, a main characteristic involves active
participation by teachers who collaborate with their colleagues. CCL focuses on instructional practice, studies student data, and establishes learning goals within a collaborative group. As a group, the teachers observe a demonstration lesson conducted by the literacy coach, which is followed by a one-hour inquiry period. Next, the teachers use the suggested instructional procedure and analyze their results. Finally, if needed, the coaches offer individual support using one-on-one coaching. Groups of teachers are rotated through these procedures every eight weeks. Neufeld and Roper (2003) evaluated this approach to literacy coaching and found that it improved instructional capacity. They also found that the teachers were more likely to try out new ideas. This Collaborative Coaching and Learning model builds teacher capacity by providing professional development through workshop demonstrations along with individual coaching.

A third model involves coaching as a means for professional development combined with instructional analysis (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Key aspects in this model are reflective analysis of teaching and adjusting instruction based on those reflections. The professional development comes when literacy coaches and teachers are debriefing after an instructional event. They engage in deep analysis of instruction, instructional interactions, and student learning. Within this deep analysis, literacy coaches form tentative ideas about the teacher’s current understanding and use their insights to focus comments about instruction.

Cognitive coaching, coaching as collaboration, and coaching as instructional analysis are important views of coaching. In this book, literacy coaching involves interactions within the classroom. Like cognitive coaching, literacy coaches and teachers reflect on instruction and student learning in a nonjudgmental way that allows for
deep reflective thinking. As in collaborative coaching, teachers and coaches discuss students’ responses in small groups and think of approaches that meet the challenges of their students. Like analytical coaching, the literacy coaches and teachers observe student learning and collect data to analyze student growth and reflect on what

**Note 1.1 Dana, a Third-Grade Teacher**

Dana, a third-grade teacher, used a directed reading-thinking activity (DRTA) in which she asked the students to predict what a story was about by reading the title. Next, she had the students read the story silently. Finally, the students discussed the story (see the Instructional Techniques section). Dana and the literacy coach reflected on the instructional lesson, thinking about student learning. They noticed that Nick seemed to be wildly guessing about story meaning. Dana wondered if Nick’s fluency was inhibiting his comprehension, so the literacy coach took Nick aside and asked him to read a paragraph aloud. He orally read the passage with remarkable fluency. Then he retold a few story events, but did not mention the characters or the theme. The literacy coach and Dana decided to adapt the DRTA and add a semantic map (see semantic map in the Instructional Techniques section) to the instructional procedure. They hoped that Nick would contribute to the brainstorming activities, talk about what he knew, and use ideas of other students. It worked! Nick became more engaged in the brainstorming activity and continued this engagement as he was reading. Thus, Nick used the semantic map to activate his prior knowledge to make predictions, relate to the characters, and construct meaning.
occurred. If student learning does not occur, they rethink instruction. Literacy coaching means supporting teachers as they engage students in literacy learning. Thus, in classroom interactions, literacy coaching involves literacy coaches, teachers, and students.

When planning, implementing, and reflecting on instruction, literacy coaches and teachers form a collaborative, decision-making relationship. They talk about student learning and how various instructional approaches and discussions might advance students’ learning. Thus, literacy coaches and teachers form the core of instructional change by collaboratively discussing students’ learning and interrelating their knowledge about literacy learning. Figure 1.1 demonstrates the collaborative relationship between the literacy coach and the teacher that grows from classroom interactions.

As literacy coaches and teachers discuss the classroom interactions, they reflect on student learning and the instructional situation that produced it. They each share their views of the class-

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**Figure 1.1**

Collaborative Relationship of Classroom Coaching Interactions
room interactions and reflect on instruction. The teacher discusses how the students were engaged, while the literacy coach talks about how the teacher skillfully redirected attention to the literacy task rather than focusing on student behavior.

To gather more ideas, literacy coaches discuss the classroom interactions with a small group of teachers with whom they exchange ideas on adapting or augmenting instruction. In these ways, literacy coaches provide frequent and ongoing support for classroom interactions.

A feature of literacy coaching includes forming collaborative groups in which teachers and coaches share their knowledge of student learning and teaching practices and talk about what occurred during instruction. Sometimes, they discuss these reflections in small groups and create a support network. Often, literacy coaches work with several collaborative groups of teachers. These groups

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**Note 1.2 Dana, a Third-Grade Teacher**

Dana discussed her instruction with her colleagues. She explained how the reflective conversations with the literacy coach helped her decide to use a semantic map with the directed reading-thinking activity. Although this was a simple adjustment, it helped Nick understand that story meaning is constructed using what you know and what is in the text. Dana also changed the context by allowing everyone to brainstorm. In this activity, Nick was able to use the ideas of his classmates to prompt his own thinking. The small collaborative group discussed other ways to assist Nick and other students like him.
form a second layer of collaborative interactions within the school community, as demonstrated in Figure 1.2. As these groups flourish, they form a larger collaborative learning community.

The Learning Community

As groups of teachers and literacy coaches reflect on student learning and discuss those reflections with others, they create a learning community. According to DuFour (2004), a learning community involves a focus on classroom learning and interactions rather than solely on teaching. Thus, teachers and literacy coaches discuss and reflect on student learning and create opportunities for
enhanced classroom interactions. In fact, Richardson and Anders (2005) found that as groups of teachers in a school were involved in a learning community, they advanced their understanding of literacy and their students became increasingly literate. Thus, literacy coaches and teachers should take time to sustain thoughtful conversations about literacy and literacy instruction. In the process, they develop relationships that enable them to learn from each other and begin to collaborate on ideas about instruction that will advance student learning. Within a learning community, literacy coaches and teachers discuss issues of instruction and contemplate innovative ways of promoting student learning.

Thus, as teachers and literacy coaches create a context in which they can share their thinking, they establish powerful learning experiences for the entire school community. The learning community involves everyone in the school in discussions about literacy learning. All personnel, including school administrators, become part of the learning community. In fact, principals are of critical importance in learning communities. As school leaders (literacy coaches and principals) and teachers discuss learning, they articulate goals for a positive academic future for students and express a genuine concern for their learning. Principals can develop the broader school community and provide significant support by encouraging teachers to participate in the learning community. As members of the learning community talk with each other, their understanding of literacy and literacy instruction advances.

**Literacy Coaches in the Learning Community**

Literacy coaches, along with principals, take the lead in sustaining a learning community. They help teachers identify instructional needs and discuss their common vision of improving student
learning. Through collaborative discussions, everyone adds to the shared understanding of literacy. The learning community involves everyone in collaborating to improve everyone’s learning. It engulfs the total school community. Thus, the final layer in Figure 1.3 surrounds the classroom coaching interactions and the small collaborative groups. The entire figure represents the learning community, with each layer influencing the others. Thus, collaborative and thoughtful conversations move the learning community forward. Within the learning community, literacy coaches help teachers think about their daily teaching and their personal beliefs.

**Figure 1.3**

The Learning Community
Thus, the literacy coach plays a key role in developing ongoing support for literacy instruction and providing leadership in the learning community.

During classroom interactions, literacy coaches build on the strengths and knowledge that teachers possess. They think about how to develop knowledge about literacy and literacy instruction as they encourage innovative practices. They carefully plan how to create collaborative experiences so the teachers can develop trusting relationships. Finally, they observe classroom teachers instructing students and develop ways to support each teacher’s practice. The following sections explain these roles. Although there are certainly other aspects that literacy coaches develop and use as they coach, these are clearly the ones that are paramount.

**Knowledge about Literacy and Literacy Instruction**

Within the learning community, teachers and literacy coaches develop a commitment to teaching literacy, and in the process they enhance their expertise in literacy instruction. Thus, literacy coaches are an important part of developing expertise within classroom interactions. According to the International Reading Association (2004), literacy coaches need to expand their knowledge of literacy processes and development as well as literacy instructional procedures and ongoing assessment in order to provide the on-the-spot expertise during and after classroom interactions.

Furthermore, there is a knowledge base for literacy that is important for continual teacher development (IRA, 2005). Drawing from several sources (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2006; Braunger & Lewis, 2005), the following are five elements that are important in literacy instruction.
1. Literacy entails the construction of meaning from various types of materials (novels, textbooks, Internet, etc.) and in various kinds of situations (classroom interactions, report writing, public debates, reading for pleasure, etc.).

2. Engagement and social interactions are keys in becoming literate and developing as a reader and writer.

3. Literacy involves complex thinking as students engage with authentic information and literature.

4. Literacy is a developmental process.

5. Literacy strategies and skills are developed through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, demonstrations, and abundant opportunities for reading and writing.

There are many publications literacy coaches can read to expand their current knowledge about literacy theories and instruction. Often, groups of teachers read or hear about creative instructional procedures or the literacy coach might suggest innovative practices. They begin by talking about these ideas within a collaborative group, with a partner, or with the literacy coach. Literacy coaches follow up by searching for information on the innovation.

Literacy coaches provide information about current theories and research so teachers can discuss the relevant features of a specific teaching practice. Therefore, it is critical that literacy coaches have a solid knowledge base in literacy and literacy instruction so they can thoroughly explain a specific instructional practice.

**Knowledge and Use of Collaboration** Leading a learning community and discussing teaching in reflective groups require expertise in collaboration. Usually, teachers work in isolation, imple-
menting the approved curriculum in their own classrooms. However, collaboration is by definition a social interaction that requires teachers to continually share their thinking and create options for teaching. A shared goal is essential for collaboration to be successful. For literacy coaching in classroom interactions, the shared goal focuses on student learning and instructional practices. Thus, literacy coaching becomes a collaborative problem-solving process.

Teachers count on the literacy coach and other teachers to suggest alternative perspectives to troubling issues and to help them develop insightful solutions. Supportive collaborative interaction is a new way for teachers to learn. Literacy coaches have to learn how to collaborate and then how to guide others to collaborate. Chapter 2 discusses collaboration in more depth.

**Supporting Teachers’ Practice**  Literacy coaches support teachers’ practice during coaching conversations by observing and

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**Note 1.3 Sixth-Grade Teachers**

A group of sixth-grade teachers wanted to develop their students’ vocabulary knowledge. In their collaborative group, they described what they knew about vocabulary development. During the week, the literacy coach selected articles on vocabulary development from the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* as well as other journals. The literacy coach brought several books to the next group meeting. The teachers and the literacy coach discussed information on vocabulary and selected a book to study for the next couple of weeks.
reinforcing instructional practices and jointly reflecting with teachers. Coaches often support teachers by lending a hand when difficult learning situations arise.

To offer support, literacy coaches think about what teachers know and the language they use to explain their actions. By reflecting on previous interactions with teachers, literacy coaches identify the way a particular teacher talks about his or her practice. Literacy coaches can then think of explanations, and recast them in the teacher’s own instructional language. Additionally, coaches should use concrete examples when they support teachers’ thinking. They might discuss a teaching interaction by saying, “I noticed how you modeled how to say the word by stretching out the sounds rather

Note 1.4 Jessica, a Second-Grade Teacher

In a second-grade class, Jessica was teaching reading using the *Frog and Toad* series. However, she had six students who were not progressing. She consulted her literacy coach, who listened to each student read a section of *Frog and Toad*. They stopped frequently to sound out words and were reading word by word. The coach and Jessica decided to have the students retell the *Frog and Toad* story. Jessica prompted the students as they retold the story and the literacy coach acted as the scribe. Then, Jessica had the students read their summary aloud. They were able to read their summaries even though they contained difficult story words. However, because the summary was in their own words, they were successful. That day, each student took home a copy of their story to read to their parents.
than by prompting with another question. That was an effective way to respond.” Thus, literacy coaches collaboratively discuss classroom interactions and teachers’ practices (see Chapter 3).

Literacy coaches notice students’ actions and the way the teachers’ instruction enhances their learning. What coaches notice becomes an important part of their conversations with teachers. Using classroom interactions, literacy coaches can support teachers’ practices.

**Teachers in the Learning Community**

Within the learning community, teachers and literacy coaches focus on student learning as their most important goal. The teachers discuss student learning with their coaches, concentrating on instructional adjustments that might improve learning. In a large-scale study of low-performing students, Kennedy (1998) found that when teachers focused on student learning rather than approaches to instruction, they advanced student learning. As they focused on learning, they began to identify the instruction that produced the learning. Thus, teachers learned from analyzing student learning. But they also learned by discussing with other teachers and the literacy coach the factors that promote literacy learning.

Within a learning community, teachers continually develop their expertise. They have opportunities to talk about subject matter, students and learning, and teaching (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Teacher learning involves many aspects, such as previous teaching experiences and beliefs about literacy. However, there are three aspects that are most important to teachers and literacy coaches. First, teachers have many experiences to think about when considering innovative teaching practices. Second, although they often reflect on their instruction, sharing these reflections with other
teachers and the literacy coach may be a new experience. Finally, teachers develop their reasons for teaching as they practice. These aspects are expanded on next.

Multiplicity of Experiences When working with teachers to develop their expertise, literacy coaches realize that teachers have a multiplicity of experiences. Many have traveled extensively, raised children, and continued their education. These teachers have accumulated extensive general and specific knowledge about teaching. In fact, after a few years, teachers think about their teaching experiences by recalling specific incidents and children in various learning situations. Thus, they develop some of their expertise by reflecting on real cases from their teaching experience. In this approach to learning, the teachers utilize their experiences as they construct new knowledge about teaching and student learning.

Reflection Effective teachers rethink their instruction. In real life, they shift between being immersed in instruction and stepping back in order to systematically review or reflect on their experiences (Walker, 2008). In fact, reflecting on and discussing those reflections within a learning community helps teachers understand teaching. In order to share their reflections, some teachers keep a journal, whereas others simply keep notes. Discussing reflections about classroom interactions may be a new experience for some teachers, and it can be a powerful experience to observe other teachers reflecting on their students’ learning. Thus, the reflective discussion facilitates the way that teachers explain their thinking to others. During reflection and discussion, teachers thoughtfully consider their teaching experiences as well as their assumptions about literacy and literacy instruction.
Practical Reasoning When teachers engage in practical reasoning, they become acutely aware of the unconsciously developed assumptions that guide their practice. As teachers reflect on their practice and grapple with the challenges of their work, they take action. Teachers’ actions often appear intuitive. However, in reality, these actions are deeply embedded in experiences, understandings, and interpretations that they have developed to make sense of their practice. As they talk about their practice, teachers verbalize their thinking, making their intuitive actions more apparent. In this way, they intertwine their practice with their reasoning. In collaborative conversations, teachers often compare their reasoning to that of their colleagues. As teachers describe their own teaching experiences, colleagues and literacy coaches can help them refine their practical reasoning.

Interrelationships of Classroom Interactions

The literacy coaching model focuses on literacy coaches, teachers, and students working together to improve classroom learning. Figure 1.4 represents the interconnectedness that occurs as students, teachers, and literacy coaches operate in concert, working toward a common goal. Individual perspectives are shared, but over time, these perspectives overlap as students, teachers, and literacy coaches learn together.

At the core of literacy coaching are the interactions among students, teachers, and literacy coaches. The teacher provides opportunities for the students to discuss literacy learning; the literacy coach provides opportunities for teachers to discuss literacy instruction; and finally, the teacher and the literacy coach
discuss how their understanding and knowledge are expanding. In doing this, everyone develops a common understanding of literacy learning and instruction. All learners’ actions influence both learning and specific interactions during instruction. For example, if a teacher adapts instruction, students often respond by using ingenious ways of thinking, thus altering future interactions. The literacy coach tries to capture the learning that occurred by noticing and noting the specific instructional interaction that precipitated this change. Therefore, everyone becomes a literacy informant, revealing how learning evolves as interactions change.

**Literacy Coaches and Teachers in the Classroom**

Literacy coaches adeptly support teachers as they improve student learning. Further, literacy coaches and teachers depend on each others’ observations and perspectives. They connect their perspectives as they
discuss literacy learning, student actions, and personal growth. As they take action together, literacy coaches provide support for teachers during instruction. They understand that teachers make appropriate choices for themselves at any given moment. They acknowledge the choice and ask about the student actions that prompted such a choice. Further, they discuss possible alternative procedures during their conversations. Encouraging reflection, the literacy coach might say, “Yes, you can do that, but what are some other choices?” In this way, they encourage teachers to think about options or alternative instructional procedures that could improve student learning.

However, even within this supportive environment, some teachers are stymied and need to actively refocus their efforts. Others are resistant to changing their instruction or classroom interactions. The literacy coach, the principal, and other teachers should try to encourage these teachers to participate within the learning community. To head off teacher resistance, literacy coaches can discuss students’ literacy and mentor the teacher by asking questions about classroom interactions. In a conversation with the teacher, they might ask, “What kind of instruction are you using?” or “What specific literacy task are you trying to improve?” By empathetically listening to the responses, literacy coaches can support the teacher’s current instruction. They can identify the teacher’s strengths and focus him or her on activities that utilize these strengths. (See The Literacy Coach’s Survival Guide and Surviving but Not Yet Thriving by Cathy Toll for further discussion on teacher resistance.)

**Students in the Classroom**

In the emphasis on teacher change, we often forget about the students and how critical their learning is. In this book, coaching is a process in which literacy coaches and teachers continually analyze
their thinking along with that of their students. Students are “no longer docile listeners but they are critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970/2005, pp. 80–81). Students are active learners that can contribute to conversations about learning. In fact, as they discuss the content of what they are reading and writing, they indicate both what they already know and what they are learning. The students’ learning, discussion, and reflection become a focal point for conversational interactions among the literacy coaches and the teachers. Truly, the innovations and ideas they have are dependent on how the students interact within the classroom context.

Summary

Literacy coaching includes students, teachers, and literacy coaches acting together to advance learning in the classroom. Although the focus of promoting student learning is foremost, teachers and literacy coaches are also learning. Together, teachers and literacy coaches develop their expertise and practices. Even though they are all learning, they are also interdependent on the actions of the others. The classroom interactions bring into play the interrelationships among the literacy coaches, the teachers, and the students. They are integral to the coaching process in the classroom.