

Citation

Paramore, T. (2007). Coaching conversations for beginners. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [On-line], 3(1), 71-81. Available: http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2007_1/conversations.pdf

Coaching Conversations for Beginners

Tonia Bowden Paramore
Kennedy Elementary School

After seven years of teaching, I can stand in front of children and present information, confer with individual students, and manage small groups of learners, but I am still terrified by the prospect of speaking in front of fellow educators. This fear alone should be reason enough for me to avoid literacy coaching as a career. When Toll's (2004) definition of a coach is added in, it should send me running toward some other area of interest. Toll defines a coach as:

One who helps teachers to recognize what they know and can do, assists teachers as they strengthen their ability to make more effective use of what they know and do, and supports teachers as they learn more and do more. (p. 5)

But I remain interested in coaching as a career and am learning about coaching in order to make an informed decision about the next step in my career. Additionally, I realize I must conquer some of my fears and misconceptions about working with teachers in order to become a successful literacy coach and a more effective communicator. I have had the opportunity to present to my co-workers several times, and I am always afraid of positioning myself as an expert. There are several reasons for this.

First, I often resent those professional development presenters who position themselves as the "guru" because I feel they cannot assume this role without a clear knowledge of the students in my classroom. Toll (2006) addresses this presumptuous danger in her book, *The Literacy Coach's Survival Guide: Essential Questions and Practical Answers*, stating:

Any group of students brings with it a unique set of characteristics, strengths and challenges, plus a unique alchemy among the students themselves. Therefore, there is no way that literacy coaches could be experts on the students in every classroom. (p. 54)

Without having this deep understanding of a classroom, a staff developer could make decisions that are not in the best interest of the students in a particular setting. A literacy coach needs to have in-depth appreciation of the specific classroom environment when making recommendations.

Secondly, when one is placed in the position of being an expert, it often creates a power struggle, especially when the ideas that are being presented are in direct opposition to the philosophical views of the teachers (Toll, 2006). I have had several experiences in professional learning where the "expert" is unwilling to address concerns of the participants because they are in direct opposition to the philosophy of the staff developer. An unwillingness to listen to ideas and address legitimate concerns often leads to feelings of resentment on the part of teachers. Once these feelings of resentment emerge, it is often difficult for teachers to overcome them. In order to be successful, Burkins (2007) advocates for literacy coaches and teachers to avoid positioning themselves as experts. She writes, "To succeed, a coach must be a leader who is

willing not to be recognized as such and, at the same time, who is able to foster leadership among teachers who rarely regard themselves as leaders” (p. 3). A successful coach is one who encourages leadership among the teachers and draws on strengths within the faculty to support their work. She is “in the trenches” with the teachers and is aware of the challenges that arise in their classrooms. The literacy coach is not seen as a figurehead of literacy knowledge but as a supportive colleague who is there to help teachers develop their skills as literacy leaders.

When asked to research an aspect of literacy coaching, I thought a lot about my fear of working with colleagues and realized there was another facet of literacy coaching I found even more daunting. A literacy coach is expected to walk into a classroom, observe teaching, and provide feedback to the teacher. It is always overwhelming to me when I am observed, and I know many other teachers have the same feeling. Each year I know it will happen, and each year I am convinced that I have not met expectations on the day the principal walks into my classroom. Was she watching the child in the back sticking his head on the floor, or the kid who just couldn't be quiet? What if I forgot to write the essential question on the board or failed to meet the lesson objective? I feel this same sense of nervousness each year, and I know my colleagues have similar fears. A literacy coach, however, is there as a support, not as a critic. She is going in to address literacy instruction in the classroom. Nonetheless, it is still an intimidating prospect for any teacher to have a colleague take a close look at her teaching. Anyone being observed tends to fear finding herself lacking in some way.

Wanting to look closely at the conversations a literacy coach would have with teachers after going into their classrooms for observations, I designed a research project. As one potential outcome, I hoped the conversations held between observer and teacher could help me create my own understandings about the role a literacy coach should try to take in building an effective philosophy of coaching that honors the individuality of teachers and students while incorporating understandings of effective literacy practices into the schools we serve.

A Project Description: Setting, Participants, and Context

I chose to conduct my research at an elementary school in a rural county approximately thirty miles from a southeastern university. I have been employed in this system as a third grade teacher for seven years. It has been my experience that each grade level has a different way of approaching literacy instruction based on individual teaching styles and philosophies. Most grade levels, however, use a basal method of whole group reading instruction, supplemented with homogeneous reading groups using trade books. Third grade has been working toward implementing reading workshop in the past year. In addition to various methods of reading instruction, we also use a commercial writing program to support children's writing development. As a grade level, we make decisions about writing instruction by using the program in conjunction with the state writing standards. Our principal supports these different methods as long as the children are successful and are working toward the school's goals related to literacy instruction.

To recruit teachers for this project, I sent out an email to the faculty in addition to approaching several teachers personally. I arranged to go into five classrooms: a kindergarten, second grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, and a third grade gifted class. With one exception, I have had relationships with all of these teachers for several years.

I was eager to see all of these classrooms for two reasons. First, teachers do not often get a chance to see the work of other teachers since we are all busy in our own classrooms. Second, I

have only had the experience of teaching third grade, so I felt that observing other classrooms would give me a view of the literacy development that is taking place in various grade levels.

I explained to the teachers my purpose in coming into their classrooms, and I reminded them that I was essentially “faking” the role of a literacy coach. My goal was to work on the conversations I would have with teachers and to begin to develop my own skills as a coach.

There was definitely a sense of artificiality in this project for several reasons. First of all, I was able to choose those teachers with whom I worked. I intentionally chose to work with teachers with whom I had developed a positive working relationship. I knew the conversations would be less difficult for me since I already had some knowledge of the philosophies and personalities of these teachers. Additionally, I would be having these conversations with teachers who already trusted and respected me as a classroom teacher. In order to make this “experiment” in coaching work, the teachers I would be working with had to trust that in my “coaching” role I would treat them with the same respect that our relationship already included.

Secondly, but most importantly, I was not the literacy coach. Our school does not have a literacy coach, so there is no expectation for the role a literacy coach would have in the school. The teachers were under no illusions that I would expect them to implement any suggestions I might make nor would this be the beginning of a coaching relationship. In all except the kindergarten classroom, I observed only one time. These observations served as a way to develop my skills as an effective observer. In the kindergarten classroom, however, I observed writing twice and interacted with the teacher several times to see the progress she was making in writing workshop with her students. She and I had worked together the previous year, and she approached me about helping her with some of the difficulties her students were having in writing workshop before I began this project.

Taking a Coaching Stance

Through readings and graduate school coursework, I came to believe several things about the role I would need to assume when going in the classroom to observe. Lyons and Pinnell (2001) argue that coaching does not usually occur until a teacher is already very familiar with a particular technique. Coaching would then occur in a way that:

supports the teacher in analyzing her own teaching, an action that has accelerative value. Once a teacher develops a system for learning from and through her teaching, all new approaches will be easier to implement and adjust to meet students’ needs. (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 159)

With these situations in mind, I realized there were some guidelines I needed to adhere to as I took on the role of literacy coach. By keeping the following guidelines in mind, I would encourage open, honest communication and establish a comfortable working relationship with those teachers I would be observing. The guidelines I created were as follows:

Communication is Key

In order to provide these teachers with effective feedback I needed to be respectful of their work, be an active listener, and respond with honesty. Scott (2004) reminds us:

There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us, who do not pamper us or offer compromises but, instead, describe reality so simply and compellingly that the truth seems inevitable, and we cannot help but recognize it. (p. 18)

In discussing my observations, I must be willing to communicate in an honest, straightforward way which focuses on the work taking place in the classroom. I must portray my observations in such a way that the work of the teacher is supported yet make suggestions to truly improve the level of literacy instruction in the classroom. Using these ideas, I would be expected to provide safe, honest feedback in a way that did not destroy the relationships I had already established.

A Plan is a Necessity

I knew I would need some method of recording my observations. I chose to use forms modeled on those used by Burkins (2007). I would have to observe with my ears open, my brain alert, and with great respect. In addition to a pre-conference form which addressed the teacher's perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as the makeup and challenges of the class being observed, I would also use an observation form which included notes on the lesson as well as an area addressing the impact on learning and instructional considerations. I decided to observe, type notes, and then share these forms with the teachers in a post-observation conference. This would then give me a clear picture of what I observed to share with the teachers, and I would have something to leave with them if they decided to adopt any of my suggestions.

Tread Lightly When Making Suggestions

I resolved to keep Toll's (2006) advice that the "nature of literacy coaching is that it is responsive to teacher's needs and strengths and to the efforts of teachers to respond to students' needs" (p. 74). I chose to focus on those things the teacher asked me to watch for in a pre-conference or to suggest one or two strategies that might help the teacher meet her goals. For example, the gifted teacher with whom I worked was concerned about a particular student's organization of her writing and her focus during writing. I looked closely at this child as she worked and made some suggestions that would support her work. I encouraged the teacher to confer with her and to use Post-it notes to record her ideas as she read her writing aloud. Another teacher expressed concern about the time her students spent "thinking" and not writing. I made notes of these behaviors, and we discussed strategies such as timers and one-on-one conferencing to encourage writing. In order to make teachers feel comfortable with the suggestions I made, I would have to use my literacy knowledge and Dozier's (2006) reminder to "frame my recommendations as possibilities rather than as absolutes" (p. 142).

Armed with all of these self-admonitions, I prepared myself to go into classrooms to observe. I would then take a close look at the conversations I held with the teachers and begin to think about the types of things I should improve in my coaching conversations.

Coaching Conversations

I attempted to hold a pre-conference with each teacher. I was able to do this with all but one of the teachers, and I now recognize the pre-conference as a vital part of any coaching conversation. I felt much more comfortable observing in the classrooms where I had conducted a pre-conference. The goal of the pre-conference was to get a feel for the types of things I would be seeing as I observed, to gain an understanding of the classroom context, and to gauge any areas the teacher may feel he or she needed a second eye, as well as to allow the teacher to get comfortable with me.

In order to help me engage in these conversations, I asked some key questions of my participants. These questions were a reflection of my need to understand the classroom in which I was observing and to give me a starting point. Since I was trying on the coaching role, I did not want to go in and step on any toes or scare anyone away during our post conference. I chose to ask these questions to establish a context for my work with each individual teacher. The questions I asked included:

1. What will be observed when I come into your classroom?
2. What do you feel your strengths are in teaching this subject?
3. Do you feel there are any weaknesses or difficulties as you teach this subject?
4. What are the things I need to keep in mind as I observe in your classroom?
5. What are the expectations you have for your children in this subject?

I tried to keep in mind Toll's (2006) admonition "teachers need to act and shape their own work lives" (p. 58). From this perspective, it was vital to find out what the teachers wanted to achieve through our work together.

In order to prepare for the observation, I typed the notes of the pre-conference and reviewed these prior to the observation. These notes helped keep me focused as I observed and also helped me attend to the particulars of each lesson. During the observations, I also recorded notes on a Classroom Visitation Feedback sheet (Burkins, 2007). After each lesson, I returned to my classroom and typed the notes from the lesson and crafted a narrative to help guide my conversation with each teacher in the post-conference. In hindsight, my conferences would have been more effective if I had held the conference and then crafted the narrative based on the conversation I held with each teacher. I failed to remember:

As a coach, even if you are telling and teaching, you recognize what the teacher is bringing to the situation. You constantly build on the working relationship you have already established with the teacher; on the teacher's own issues, concerns, and questions; the teacher's understanding of the reading and writing processes; and on her knowledge of the particular students in her class (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 165)

By creating my narrative beforehand, I left out the teacher's perspective. I think I became so concerned with providing appropriate feedback while not jeopardizing safe, working relationships that I forgot to include the perspective of the teacher in that final conversation. As a coach, this is not a mistake I need to make. Burkins (2007) reminds us that "if we watch and listen to teachers more than we talk to them, we will find that they usually know what their important projects need to be" (p. 70). By failing to keep this in mind, I let my need and desire for safe relationships get in the way of the conversations. It is also possible that I overwhelmed the teachers with the suggestions of too many strategies. Instead of asking questions to assess the teacher's knowledge and meet her needs, I was giving a list of suggestions without reaching for understandings the teacher may have already been developing.

Initially, I was very upset when I realized what I had done, but then I understood I was still coaching with training wheels. Now was the time for me to make mistakes because I had the support of a network of learners in my university class who also were learning about coaching skills. Additionally, I was engaged in reading texts related to literacy coaching that were supporting the observations and conferences I was having with my colleagues. Lyons and Pinnell (2001) created two lists in their book that would have been very helpful for me to keep in mind as I was having these post-conferences. In the future perhaps I will copy them on note cards to use while I am having a conference.

Some purposes for asking questions are to:

1. Help teachers observe and analyze student behavior.
2. Help teachers become aware of their own decisions and the impact they have on students.
3. Help teachers deepen their understanding of reading and writing processes.
4. Help teachers reflect on their own learning.

(Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 164)

In selecting coaching points, consider these criteria:

- Identify the most important thing for the teacher to learn next.
- Find the best example to help the teacher understand your coaching point.
- Go for the one big idea that will make other things fall into place.

(Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 165)

My reflections upon the conference conversations and notes also led me to examine those questions I felt were most effective. The questions that were most effective were those that encouraged the teachers to think deeply about their practice. Some of these questions I prepared as I wrote the narrative after viewing the lessons, and others were generated as the teacher and I discussed the lessons. Some of the questions I generated, tested, and found to be effective were:

- What did you think about the lesson?
- What would your classroom look like during writing in an ideal situation?
- What is your role as in the classroom during writing time?
- What do you bring to the teaching of writing with these children?
- What are the things you would like to me to keep my eyes open for while I am observing?
- What are the structures you have in place for peer conferencing?

By keeping effective questions, strategies, and the types of changes categorized by Toll (2007) as those that can change teachers' behaviors, attitudes, habits of mind, and interactions, I would be able to conduct more effective conferences with teachers if and when I accepted a position as a literacy coach, which is something I continue to contemplate. The use of effective questioning strategies and goal-setting would position my coaching in a way that would address the needs identified mutually by the teacher and literacy coach.

Conclusion

Every now and then it is nice to get out of one's comfort zone and try on a new role, and I did this through engaging in conferences and observations with teachers. From this experience, I learned I need to develop and refine my questioning strategies. I also learned how important it is to listen and that I should be willing to allow silence to become a regular part of my coaching. My first instinct was to jump into the conversation by providing a strategy or a quick fix. Perhaps that was one of the limitations of my type of inquiry. I am aware that in a true coaching situation, real, deep change will take a great deal of time and energy, and the quick introduction of a new strategy will not lead to effective change in my school.

My goal in this project was to look closely at myself in the role of a literacy coach and to study the conversations I would engage in as a literacy coach. I came to understand the

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

importance of avoiding taking an “expert” stance and of providing support to teachers through conversation, not through quick suggestions. I also came to realize that the role of literacy coach takes time to cultivate and that the most successful conversations are those that take place when a respectful relationship has been nurtured over time. For all of my earlier apprehension about working with colleagues, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself enjoying working with adults as much as I enjoy working with my students.

Tonia Bowden Paramore is a third grade teacher at Kennedy Elementary School in Winder, Georgia. She is currently working on a Specialist in Language Education at the University of Georgia.

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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

Appendix 1

Preconference Notes

Visitor: Tonia Paramore

Teacher: Jane Doe

Date of Preconference: 2/20/07

Date of Observation: 2/21/07

Lesson to be Observed: Writing Workshop

What will be observed in the classroom?	Strengths in the teaching of the subject
<p>The students will be working on writing to an audience</p> <p><i>(I should have asked about how she is planning to teach this.)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tries to meet individually with students particularly those who are having difficulty ○ Gives time to develop ideas to keep them from getting "stuck" as they begin writing
Weaknesses / Difficulties in the teaching of the subject	What do I need to keep in mind about your classroom as I observe?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The dynamics of the classroom are difficult even though some of the students leave the room during writing she still has 17. Some students are not writing independently (a lot of thinking time). ○ Giving students too much information / ideas in conferences <p><i>(I suggested management strategies would be something I could look for as well as ideas for conferencing without giving ideas)</i></p>	<p>Teacher feels the class is "behind" compared to other fifth graders at this point in the year. Contributes this to inconsistency in the teaching of writing across the elementary grades.</p>
What expectations do you have for your children?	
<p>Writing assessment is in two weeks. Students should be writing informational, persuasive, or narrative essays "confidently" with at least 5 paragraphs. Conventions, onomatopoeia, similes / metaphors, effective leads, etc. should be included in writing at this point in the year. At this point students should be "polishing" writing skills. Teacher feels student is behind where they need to be. She also expresses concerns over handwriting (handwriting may make papers unscorable)</p>	

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

Appendix 2

Classroom Visitation Feedback

Visitor: Tonia Paramore

Teacher: Jane Doe

Date: 2-21-07

Time in: 7:55 a.m.

Time Out: 8:39 a.m.

Lesson: (Writing) How does our audience affect our writing?

What the students were doing	What the teacher was doing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -putting DOL away and getting out agendas to write the EQ -Many of the children were enthusiastic about the idea of writing for a friend vs. writing for old people (test assessors). They seemed to have knowledge of the topic and provided appropriate examples. -There was a group of students who dominated the conversation (very eager) while some others never spoke / engaged. -Asked questions to clarify topics / procedures for writing. -Most had knowledge of the process expected by the teacher using the components of WFTB -gathered appropriate materials and engaged in writing while talking to neighbors, calling out questions, seeking the attention of the teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Write EQ and restates for the children -used a transparency to make a double bubble map of writing for friends and old people. Engaged children in a discussion of these 2 different registers of writing. -set up assignment of writing to a friend about a party they missed and discussed ideas that would need to be included in the writing -Stopped children to offer reminders / prompts -Worked with one particular child who has difficulty with the independence required for writing -Prompted children to move from circle map, to flow map, to writing -Had children put writing away in pockets to work on later in the afternoon
<p>Students: 15</p>	<p>Texts: NA</p>

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

Impact on Learning and Instructional Considerations:

Mrs. Doe is very supportive of her children. She has created a classroom environment where there is a lot of talk as the children work, and her personality is conducive to this type of work. Most of the children are very comfortable sharing with the group, and there is a sense of community in the room. The children called out the spelling of words to other students.

Mrs. Doe spent a lot of time prompting the children and giving them support as they worked. She circulated the room and provided feedback and suggestions often to one student and often to the whole group. She spent more time with Darius, and she stated in our postconference that he and another student needed a lot of support while writing. This is a concern because she will not be able to provide this support during the writing assessment which is coming up in 2 weeks. We discussed the possibility of seating them together and beginning to offer more nonverbal prompts (a tap on the desk, or shoulder to signal they need to focus / move forward).

It was obvious the children are very verbal and that they need time to interact with each other. I suggested offering a structure which encouraged pair-share before writing and then setting a timer for silent writing time to allow the children to get started. This quiet will encourage thoughtful response and allow teacher to circulate and see whom she may need to conference with. I also suggested the teacher continue to offer support, but that she sit at a table to conference to have the children become more independent as they write. This will allow the children to have continued support, but it will also begin to build a philosophy of quiet writing. In time, Mrs. Doe may want to begin to move around more for conferences, but in building a writing community she made need to step away for a little while especially while getting them ready for the writing assessment.

We also discussed having share time at the end of writing to encourage more verbalization for the students. Mrs. Doe is concerned about her struggling writers, and I suggested seating them near her while she confers with other students as a way to begin implementing some touch proximity controls.

It is important to set up a writing workshop environment where all of the students feel safe and supportive and where writing becomes sacred. By respecting the need for writing along with the need for quiet, reflective writing, a balance will hopefully be struck in the workshop.

Mrs. Doe also expressed concern about being unable to score writing because of handwriting. I said I would look into some strategies to possibly assist these children.

It was a joy to see children who were excited about writing and a teacher who wanted to provide a supportive environment for them.