

PREFACE

My 5-year-old son lives in costume. Daily he finds accessories around the house that he imagines as part of some new persona: fireman, pilot, clown. The other morning as I was immersed in this work, Natie approached me requesting that I zip the part of his Spiderman costume that was beyond the reach of his little fingers. The subtle irony of his request struck me as funny; Spiderman needed his mother to zip up his suit before he could swing away on his web and save the world. Certainly, teachers are education's superheroes. In the present political climate, educators are responsible for more documentation, more instruction, more content knowledge, more professional learning hours, and more public scrutiny. While a teacher's list of responsibilities has always been amazingly long, it seems that of late it is almost endless.

Recently, some risk management advisors developed a Blood Born Pathogen Policy for a nearby school district. Administrators then distributed the policy among the teachers in the school system and directed them all to become familiar with it. A friend of mine who taught in this district dutifully studied it. This policy stated that teachers should, "Teach children how to stop their own bleeding." It further directed teachers to have the children practice this until they were proficient. So, along with new standards and curricula in traditional content areas, it seems that teachers must dust off their Boy Scout or Girl Scout first-aid training badges and teach their students to apply pressure to their wounds, as this is part of the many periphery curricula for which they are responsible.

In *Coaching for Balance: How to Meet the Challenges of Literacy Coaching* (Burkins, 2007), I maintain that literacy coaches, like teachers, are much like Superman and Wonder Woman. Read any literacy coach's job description and you are likely to agree; ours are jobs for superheroes. Furthermore, literacy coaching seems to be following a trajectory similar to that of classroom teachers; our lists of duties are exponentially expanding. Coaching positions that were initially held sacred have given way to myriad additional, and arguably unnecessary, responsibilities. With the novelty of coaching wearing thin, we become the extra pair of hands in the building. Given the trend toward misunderstanding our roles and given the enormity of the legitimate responsibilities we carry, it seems incumbent upon us to make every effort to share our work.

While you may not think of yourself as Superman or Wonder Woman, if you are juggling the many roles of a literacy coach, you are more like a superhero than you might think. You are probably leaping over tall bookrooms with a single bound, supporting change that is faster than a speeding bullet, and battling the evil forces that seek to take over the world

of teaching through standardization of all kinds. So, with all you are doing to make the world of education a better place, let this book be the help you need to get the zipper on the back of your superwear zipped.

Sharing Our Work

Whenever I am with a group of coaches, I'm intrigued by the commonality of our concerns—not just our concerns but also our work. I have been struck by how helpful it has been to talk with other literacy coaching professionals about the very basics of how we engage in our varying practices. It seems that there are parallels and overlaps with the work we do with teachers, such that many of us are inventing and reinventing the same tools. It is this overlap that led me to publish this collection of tools and resources. Perhaps if we could claim some of this multiplicity of effort, we could be even more productive.

We are all creating observation forms; we are all creating rubrics for guided reading; we are all creating forms for documenting our time and for gathering feedback during professional learning. Perhaps this compilation of tools, which represents the diversity of tasks we perform with regularity, will prevent you from developing something that has already been created or give you a head start in developing a tool yourself. Please take the tools you find here and claim them for yourself. Utilize and vary them to suit your particular coaching context.

How This Book Came To Be

As previously mentioned, this book grew out of a realization that there is redundancy in our work that, if shared, could make all of our jobs a bit more productive. Once I proposed this book idea to the International Reading Association (IRA), I solicited submissions of tools through various literacy coach websites and simply through word of mouth. I also kept my ears and eyes open, and when I came in contact with a coach who had created something I thought might be valuable for other coaches, I requested permission to share it. I received more than 50 tools from literacy coaches and university professors all across the United States. In addition, I continued developing and piloting tools in my work. Coaches are an intelligent, creative lot, and I am thrilled to be able to illustrate that here. I narrowed and refined the collection of tools through my own work with them and with their developers, as well as through the peer review process for all publications submitted to IRA. Most important, as I scrutinized the various submissions, I returned to the assumptions and philosophies that I have tried to let shape and inform my literacy coaching practice.

Suppositions About Literacy Coaching

As a literacy coach, the heart of my work and the foundation of my practice has been the supposition that teachers are capable, dedicated, and caring. Furthermore, as I have read professional literature and as I have gathered tools, those that are rooted in these positive assumptions, and consequently in line with my coaching philosophy, are the ones that make the most sense for my work and my professional growth. Cathy Toll (2005) writes, “As long as there are millions of adults going to work every day at least in part because they care about children, we can hope for anything” (p. 135), and Donald McAndrew (2005) maintains that “Exemplary leaders believe that each stakeholder can be expected to perform well when the context encourages and supports that competence” (p. 20). Such assumptions that demonstrate hopefulness are the fuel of my work with teachers and are the common thread throughout the tools I included in this book. Throughout the process of writing and editing this text, I kept asking myself, What does the inclusion of this tool say about my beliefs about coaching? What will the subtext of my choice say to those who read it? The exercise proved enlightening for me, and I enjoyed the opportunity to reflect and revisit the beliefs to which I have worked to align my practice.

Toward the end of establishing more solidly for you my philosophical stance, I include the list of Assumptions of Goodwill that were originally printed in *Coaching for Balance* (Burkins, 2007, p. 78). These are the beliefs with which I try to align my actions. While I’m not always successful, I return to them again and again to realign my work with my established philosophy of coaching.

Assumptions of Goodwill

- Teachers want to be better at their jobs.
- Teachers want all of their students to be broadly literate.
- Teachers care about children.
- Teachers want to learn.
- Teachers want to teach.
- Teachers have the most difficult jobs in education.
- Teachers have the most important jobs in education.
- Teachers have the least respected jobs in a field that earns little respect.
- Teachers know the most about their children.
- Teachers want to be part of a larger learning community.
- Teachers are hard workers.
- Teachers are intelligent.

- Teachers are strong.
- Teachers are competent.
- Teachers want to do what is best for their students.
- Teachers want to know how to improve their instruction.
- Teachers can teach each other.
- Teachers have the right, the expertise, and the insight to play a critical role in decision making regarding curriculum, professional learning, assessment, and instruction.

From Philosophy to Action

While these tools were selected for inclusion in this book because they fit with the tenets I try to hold close in my work, it is easy for their intent to get lost in their interpretation. So, for purposes of further clarification, I want to share three guiding principles that I hope you will let influence the way you take these tools from the abstraction of the page to the realities of your school.

1. I don't keep notes on teachers that I would be uncomfortable sharing with them. The following question serves as my litmus test: How would I feel if I accidentally left these notes on the copier in the teacher workroom? In fact, all of the notes I make in classrooms—and this represents the bulk of my “documentation” about teachers—I copy for my files and give the original to teachers.
2. I don't use any kind of form in classrooms unless I have involved teachers in selecting, examining, or developing it. I do not walk into classrooms, make notes on an unexplained form, and then conference with teachers about how they did or did not meet the expectations set by that document.
3. This principle is related to the previous one; I do not use checklists in classrooms. I find that they are extremely limited, usually top-down, and rarely capture the many dimensions of a classroom. Most checklists, whether overtly or subtly, are supervisory tools.

Organization of This Book

This book is divided into six chapters. Each chapter opens with an introduction of Opening Thoughts to orient you to that group of tools. In addition to the section introductions, each tool (or sometimes cluster of tools) has a general description or orientation. If I did not develop the tool, the name of the developer(s) is included here, as well as suggestions for

using it. In many cases, I include my rationale for selecting this tool for the collection as well as variations on its use.

My assignment of tools to chapters was, in many cases, a matter of considering the tool through one lens; however, a particular tool might have logically fit in a number of different sections. In the end, I found that most of the tools that made the final cut for inclusion passed a “versatility test.” For example, a guided reading rubric could be used to support decisions about professional learning, as a self-assessment for teachers, or as a tool for gathering information while visiting classrooms. I believe the applications for these tools extend far beyond the limits of my suggestions and even beyond the limits of literacy coaching and into the realms of coaching across many content areas. Please don’t limit your creativity in using these tools to the boundaries of my thinking. I encourage you to reach beyond the confines of my imagination.

The first chapter in this book, “Defining and Clarifying Your Role,” includes tools fundamental to launching your literacy coaching work in ways that set you up for success. Chapter 1 explores the various aspects of your job, as defined by your school district. This section houses tools that can serve as the skeleton upon which you can hang your literacy coaching philosophy.

Chapter 2, “Stepping Into the Work of Literacy Coaching,” is about communicating your role with the teachers in your school. This chapter maintains that the success of the coaching program you engage in is contingent upon teachers understanding the ways you can support them.

In Chapter 3, “Stretching Yourself,” you will find tools for attending to your own professional learning. In this chapter I contend that in order for you to meet the demands of supporting the professional learning across an entire school you must be strategic in addressing your own needs for professional growth. The tools in this chapter are designed to help you stretch your own learning.

You will find resources for working with professional learning in Chapter 4, “Developing and Supporting Learning Communities.” These tools are designed to help you support inquiry among teachers, manage the challenges of group work, and gather feedback from teachers. They are designed around the idea that the best professional learning is that which is designed to model the principles it is trying to teach.

Chapter 5, “Coaching Individual Teachers,” is a collection of tools for recording what you see and hear in classrooms. It includes tools for supporting pre- and postobservation conferences with teachers and for encouraging teacher reflection. These tools are open-ended and designed to help you objectively capture classroom language. They are designed to support your visits to classrooms but are situated squarely on a philosophy that is respectful of teachers as the decision makers in their classrooms.

Because my philosophy of literacy coaching hinges on the presupposition of collegiality rather than supervision, you will see this thread running consistently through the forms in this chapter. These tools all align with a strengths-based perspective and are included here because they demonstrate positive assumptions of teachers.

Finally, Chapter 6, “Documenting Your Work, Managing Your Time,” includes tools for recording the ways you spend your time. The purpose of this section is to increase the transparency of your work so that there aren’t administrative impediments to your efforts to move forward. These tools are designed to make a record of your work without overloading you with documentation.

Finding the Right Tool

Within the structure described, there are other elements I have included to make it simpler for you to find the tool you need. My father is a dentist, and he impressed on me the importance of finding the perfect tool. I spent my high school summers working in his office. Occasionally a dentist somewhere would invent a new dental tool to accomplish some intricate dental procedure more efficiently, and my father would celebrate the ways this new tool would make his job more efficient. I can remember one particular time when he held some long metal instrument up and showed it to me. I don’t remember exactly what procedure he was in the middle of, but I do remember him saying, “There is nothing like having the perfect tool.” Whether the handle was made so that he could reach into the back of the mouth without getting in his own way or the working end was shaped exactly to fit between teeth 13 and 14, I can’t remember. But I have always remembered what he said, and I have had the same experience in various coaching situations, particularly since I have begun working on this collection of tools.

To help you find the perfect tool for your particular coaching challenge and to make navigating the other various elements of this book straightforward, I have used a consistent and predictable organizational structure. First, each tool is sorted into the chapter topic most clearly related to its application. Second, the chapters are divided into the components that follow:

Coaching Connections—These are brief presentations of metaphors that have surfaced in my life outside of school and have informed the way I think about coaching. They represent the reflective overlap between my personal life and my professional life. Because coaching and mothering are the two biggest dimensions of my life right now, most of these anecdotes connect working in school with working with my family.

Coaching Stories—These are coaching vignettes, related directly to the topic of the chapter. I wrote these with the intent of offering you a coaching example that might provide insight into your own action. These are based on true stories of my work with teachers.

Related Research—In this section, I present research related to the tool or the topic of a particular section. These are brief summaries of sound research related to literacy coaching.

Tools—These are the specific forms, exercises, and protocols that are the heart of this text. In a number of instances, I include for your reference completed versions of the tools.

Links to *Coaching for Balance*—If you want to read more on a particular topic, these cross references will point you to correlated information in my previous book.

In addition, each chapter ends by asking you how you will apply this learning to your personal coaching context. The closing of each chapter offers a few resource recommendations that will support your further learning on the topic of the chapter, a few questions for reflection, and some possible action steps (although each of the forms in this book is basically an action step).

Conclusions: A Word About Imagination

The work of literacy coaches is in many ways a work of imagination. We imagine futures where student learning is rich and comprehensive. We imagine schools where all children have equal opportunities and access. We imagine educational systems that support rather than hinder teachers. We even imagine the best of teachers whose actions we might interpret as contrary to the positive assumptions we work to hold close.

Along these lines, Maxine Greene (1995) writes,

I would suggest again, however, that it may well be the imaginative capacity that allows us also to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours. Imagination may be a new way of decentering ourselves, of breaking out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard into a space where we can come face to face with others and call out, “Here we are.” (p. 31)

I encourage you to work imaginatively and to let the resources here spur you in this effort. Take this collection of tools, words, and ideas with you as you creatively and optimistically scale your literacy challenges like Spiderman on the tallest skyscraper. I hope you will find something here that will support you in your ongoing efforts to change the world.