

# The FLORIDA Reading JOURNAL

## Sail Away With Books

### *In this issue...*

Just Read Florida Update.

Planning a Researched Based  
Read-Aloud.

Preservice Teachers' Beliefs,  
Attitudes, and Knowledge  
Regarding Teaching Writing.

Tips to Support Literacy Coaches.

Service Learning and Social Action  
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# The FLORIDA Reading JOURNAL

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## HOW TO SUPPORT LITERACY COACHES: TOP FIVE TIPS

M. Tara Joyce  
St Xavier University

**Abstract:** Literacy coaching has become the predominant model for delivering job-embedded professional development in literacy for teachers in K-12 settings. Questions centered on the role of literacy coaches dominated early research in this field. What steps can be taken to support literacy coaches so that they might carry out their work with teachers and administrators more effectively? Suggestions are proposed based on the existing literature and experience with literacy coaches in the field as well as students in the process of becoming literacy coaches.

Keywords: literacy coaching, professional development

The literature is replete with articles on what literacy coaches can do to help teachers, but what about supporting literacy coaches in their own work? Literacy coaches are under tremendous pressure to help teachers improve literacy in elementary and secondary schools. In this article, suggestions will be given as to what teacher education professionals and school leaders can do to support the work of literacy coaches.

Why should anyone care about supporting literacy coaches? With the emphasis on Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010) that focus on literacy in all areas including the disciplines in secondary schools, literacy coaches have much to offer in both elementary and secondary school settings. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) require that students apply more literacy skills, not fewer, and thus, any school-wide efforts to improve literacy would increase the likelihood of students meeting the CCSS. The standards necessitate that schools alter how teachers teach literacy overall as well as literacy across disciplines. In the introduction to *Common Core Literacy Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* the authors state:

Literacy standards for grade 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects using their content area expertise to

help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p.3)

As the International Reading Association (2012) states in the Guidance document concerning CCSS, "...these standards represent qualitatively different outcomes and their accomplishment will require significant shifts in educational practice involving teachers across the curriculum" (p. 4). Working with teachers on their educational practice is what literacy coaches do, thus placing coaches at the forefront of making adjustments in teaching practices.

Literacy coaches must cope with multiple obligations: observing and consulting with classroom teachers; modeling lessons in classrooms; assessing students; providing, or arranging for, professional development to include leading professional learning communities which might be study groups; working with teachers on analyzing literacy assessment data; collaborating with literacy teams as well as administrators on school-wide plans for literacy improvement; writing grants; researching instructional strategies for teachers; investigating reading-related issues for administrators; and keeping up with research in the field. Thus the job of a literacy coach involves a variety of responsibilities and roles that need to be articulated and prioritized.

### 1. Clearly Define the Role of the Literacy Coach and Share This Information

Initial research on literacy coaching focused primarily on describing the roles of literacy coaches. This focus was necessary since the models for literacy coaching were being established and the field of reading was moving from using reading specialists who worked mainly with students to literacy coaches who work mainly with teachers. Even with the attention given to the roles of literacy coaches, there is still confusion about precisely what those roles are. In one survey administered to middle and secondary level coaches, 74% indicated that their role was not clearly defined and their main roles were determined to be as collaborators, coaches, and evaluators (Blamey, Meyer, & Walpole, 2008). Poorly defined roles can lead to frustration on the part of the coach as well as resentment by some teaching staff members who might be unaware that the coach's research and work on a particular project are part of the job.

Administrators and coaches alike should become familiar with predominant models of literacy coaching, such as the configuration constructed by Vogt and Shearer (2011) in which six models are explained: Informal Coaching Model, Mixed Model/Elements of Informal and Formal Literacy Coaching, Formal Literacy Coaching Model, Peer Coaching and Mentoring Model, Cognitive Coaching Model, and Clinical Supervision Model. Because school districts vary in how they wish literacy coaches to function, it is always recommended that prospective coaches receive a clear job description and that this description be forwarded to and understood by school personnel so that everyone knows exactly what the coaches are expected to do (Vogt & Shearer, 2011).

If an administrator is uncertain about what specifically he or she wants the coach to do, he or she might ask literacy coach candidates what they see as their tasks as well as their overall approaches to coaching. This discussion, furthermore, might lead to clarification about the potential fit of a

particular coach in a particular school. Teachers who become literacy coaches at schools where they already work are often especially well-informed on what is needed for successful coaching. It would be a sign of strength, and indicate a stance of collaboration, for an administrator to ask a prospective literacy coach for input as to possible direction for coaching in a school or district.

## **2. Propose Observation of and Networking with Other Literacy Coaches**

Teachers in university graduate reading programs intending to become reading specialists or literacy coaches often voice interest in observing literacy coaches successfully performing their work. In addition, coaches often report that they have no idea what other literacy coaches in their district are doing. One person who was coaching part-time said that she wanted "solid examples of what literacy coaches do on a daily basis."

Schools who can network with other schools are in a position to provide an opportunity for coaches from different schools to meet and share ideas and strategies. Release time could be given for coaches to do this. Teaching professionals always enjoy hearing about what others are doing and often adapt ideas that they have heard about directly from teachers and coaches.

Support for literacy coaches can be in the form of informal groups of coaches who come together to offer support to each other. During data collection for a pilot survey of literacy coaches, coaches were asked what would help them in their work. One secondary literacy coach wrote, "I need a good working structure and would appreciate having a support group to help me troubleshoot." While for many literacy coaches, face-to-face support may be the most useful, for others, online support may be preferable, especially for coaches who have limited time outside their school setting.

### **3. Offer Solid Professional Development on Adult Learning and on What Literacy Coaches Actually Need**

Most of what a literacy coach does is to provide job-embedded professional development in the true sense of the term. Yet many researchers have cited the need for good professional development for the coaches themselves. In their research on elementary literacy coaching, L’Allier, Elish-Piper, and Bean (2010) stressed the importance of knowledge about adult learning to assist literacy coaches in working with teachers who are adults. (This is in addition to quality professional development or college/university preparation in reading, of course, which they showed was related to improved student achievement in reading.) Blamey, Meyer, and Walpole (2008) also identified a need for professional development in the area of adult learning techniques. Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell (2012) found that literacy coaches themselves expressed a need for more professional development on how to work with adult learners; more than half of the participants in a state training “did not feel the training provided them with useful information on how to work with adult learners” (p. 18). Coaches in the Marsh et al. study reported the same need for their district monthly professional development sessions. This appears to be an overlooked area. It makes sense that since teachers are adults, specific skills and techniques would be required to work with them effectively. Most literacy coaches have been teachers who have worked with children, so the shift from working with children to adults is a significant one that is sometimes underestimated.

In addition, literacy coaches are often required to attend professional development sessions on what they already know. This practice can be frustrating because coaches always want to know more, but they have needs in specific areas that are likely different from most teachers’ needs. Literacy coaches may at times be perceived as unmotivated by an

apparent lack of interest in attending district professional development. Literacy coaches might appear very motivated if they were to receive professional development in specific areas they request. Asking literacy coaches what they would like to know more about is one way to ensure that their professional development is targeted to their individual needs (as is recommended for the teachers they coach). Soliciting input regarding professional development needs reflects best practice and is more likely to engage coaches. It also contributes to more of an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) which reflects a belief that what one does affects what happens in a person’s life; the opposite idea is an external locus of control in which a person feels that it doesn’t matter what actions are performed, i.e., there is no control over one’s destiny. An external locus of control tends to reduce personal motivation and may lower morale in a school or district.

### **4. Encourage Reflection and Discussion**

Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, and Shock (2009) found that teacher reflection, with coaches and each other, was key in a coaching conversation model in which K-3 students’ reading scores improved. According to Stover, Kissel, Haag, and Shoniker (2011) literacy coaching should focus on reflection, including conversations based on videotaped lessons. In working with coaches to provide differentiated coaching, they found that, “Giving teachers time, choice, and a coach’s response made a documented difference” (p. 507).

In addition to encouraging teachers to reflect on their work, literacy coaches themselves should engage in reflection. It is through reflection that change and renewal can take hold. The model reported by Peterson et al. (2009) is illustrative of one form of reflection, specifically, observation by a coach of a teacher/coach conversation followed by feedback to the observed coach. (This can also be done using video of teacher/coach conversations.)

Discussion among literacy coaches, teachers, and administrators is essential for improved literacy in a school or district. Collaboration occurs at many levels when different parties can meet and problem-solve around issues of data, scheduling, and curriculum change. More than anything else, collaboration requires time spent in discussion.

### 5. Provide Literacy Coaches with Time

From the existing literature on literacy coaching and from speaking with students studying how to be reading specialists/literacy coaches as well as literacy coaches working in the field, it appears that **time is the greatest need**. This need has been documented in studies conducted with elementary and secondary literacy coaches, whether the issue was specifically asked about or not.

Lynch and Ferguson (2010) found that “(a) limited principal involvement, (b) resistant teachers, (c) too many schools to service, (d) role uncertainty, and (e) limited resource material” (p. 209) were barriers to effective coaching. They also noted that time barriers were associated with other barriers, and that time with teachers was most important. Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) asserted that time for teachers to talk to each other was very important. This conclusion was supported by Steckel (2009) and Gross (2012). Snow, Ippolito, and Schwartz (2006) noted that secondary schools, in particular, are faced with schedules of time blocks that are more inflexible than those of elementary schools, making the secondary coaching setting more difficult, along with other reasons. In addition, many secondary schools are having their content area teachers act as literacy coaches, which when implemented thoughtfully, is an attractive model. However, these secondary teachers need release time to coach well. If coaching (formal or informal) is expected on top of a full-time teaching load, effectiveness is reduced and these literacy coaches are more likely to burn out quickly.

Use literacy coaches’ time wisely. If literacy coaches really need to attend particular meetings, they should do so with the recognition that these obligations are in fact part of the job. However, if coaches perceive that some meetings are truly a waste of their time, forced attendance may not be wise. Rather than attending unpromising meetings, coaches might spend the majority of their time on coaching and collaborating.

In one of the few studies that asked what coaches themselves perceived as being supportive of their work with teachers, Matsumara, Sartoris, Bickel, and Garnier (2009) found the following: 1) being treated as a professional 2) public endorsement of the coach as a literacy expert 3) being provided with sufficient time and resources, and 4) active participation by the principal (p. 681). If principals would be willing to incorporate these dimensions in their leadership with their literacy coaches, this would be a step toward producing both satisfaction and effectiveness in literacy coaches.

It would seem that providing teachers and literacy coaches with more time to collaborate is an inexpensive measure when compared to other new initiatives and programs. To be sure, it will involve more time on the front end for principals and other administrators who are responsible for scheduling. Scheduling issues, especially for secondary schools, are complex and involve many staff members. However, the time spent carving out more time for coaches and teachers to collaborate would seem like a good long-term investment. Especially in times of cutbacks, principals are looking for ways to make the most of the staff they have to assist in making sure that students meet Common Core State Standards. Ensuring that staff members actually have time to collaborate is one way to set the stage for all staff to support students’ literacy improvement.

## Conclusion

In order to assist K-12 students in meeting Common Core State Standards, a school-wide effort is needed. Literacy coaches can be key players in this effort, by working with teachers to deliver strong literacy instruction. The literature on literacy coaching as well as information from literacy coaches in the field indicate that there are steps that can be taken to support the work of literacy coaches. When school personnel understand the role of the literacy coach in a school, the job of the literacy coach is made more transparent, reducing resentment and confusion. Literacy coaches require encouragement to network with other literacy coaches in a district since networking encourages an exchange of ideas and fosters creativity. Teachers and coaches alike need to reflect and be able to discuss literacy instruction and related issues collaboratively. Professional development is best when it includes techniques for working with adult learners as well as other areas delineated by literacy coaches in a school or district. More than anything else, literacy coaches need time—time to work directly with teachers, time to collaborate with administrators and staff, time to reflect on their work, and time to complete the many functions for which they are specially trained.

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*M. Tara Joyce is an Assistant Professor of Education in the School of Education at Saint Xavier University in Chicago, Illinois.*



## Literacy Studies

*at the*  
**University of South Florida, Tampa**

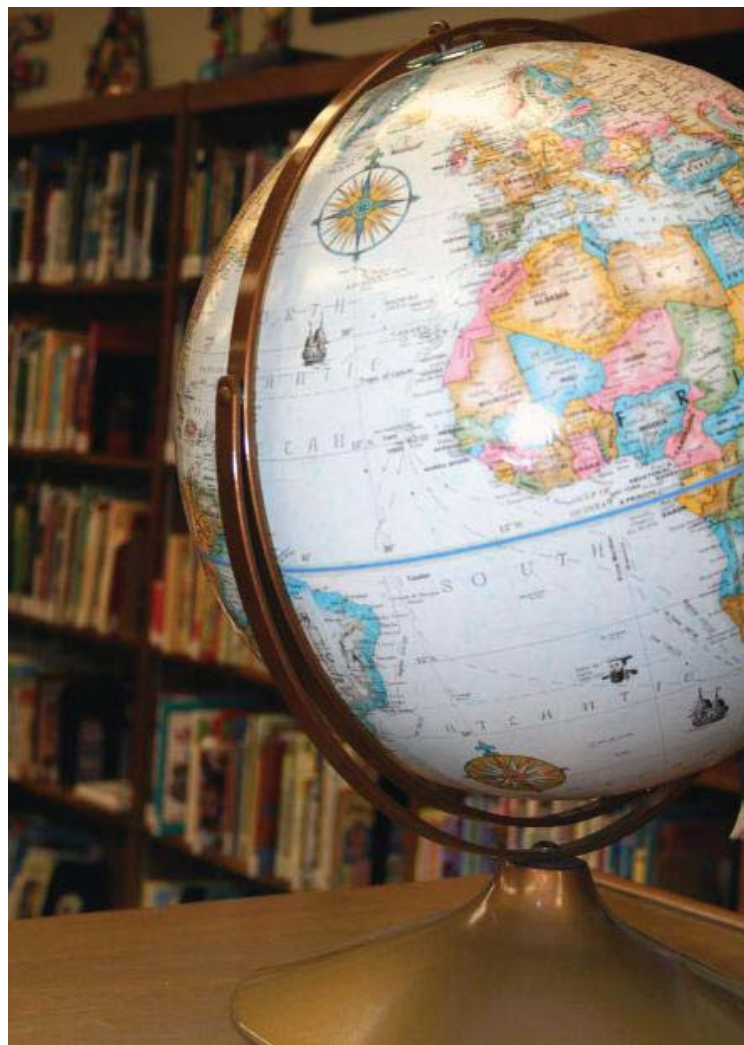
- Offering an online MA in Reading\*
- Promoting excellence in K-12 literacy teaching
- Developing coaching skills for literacy leadership
- Advancing media & technology competencies
- Featuring research-faculty instructors





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## Technology: Reading with a side of Service Learning (or at least Social Action)

Terence Cavanaugh  
University of North Florida  
t.cavanaugh@unf.edu



“**Social action** is an activity dealing with social issues, i.e. reading resources for others.

**Service learning** is a method of teaching that combines formal instruction with a related service for the local community or society.

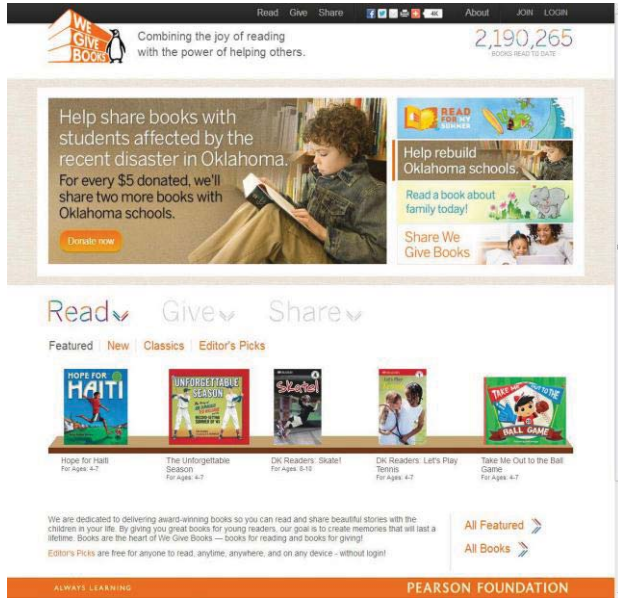
I sometimes hear teachers and parents complain of the laziness of students, that they just don't want to spend the time doing what they should - although I did recently have a long discussion with another teacher about whether they were being lazy or just efficient. One thing that the current generation of students is doing that was so far beyond my own generation's ability is with their willingness to volunteer. People often will think about a student volunteer program or project having students do a carwash or walk-a-thon to raise money, working with the scouts to help others, or giving time at a local shelter, and all these things are happening today, but there is also so much more. In 2005, more than 83 % of incoming college freshmen in the US has volunteered in the previous year, with over 70% doing it on a weekly basis (Higher Education Research Institute). Today's digital environment has expanded the opportunities and options for students to volunteer. Today you don't have to spend a lot of time or even find a big group to work with to volunteer and help others.

### Wikipedia

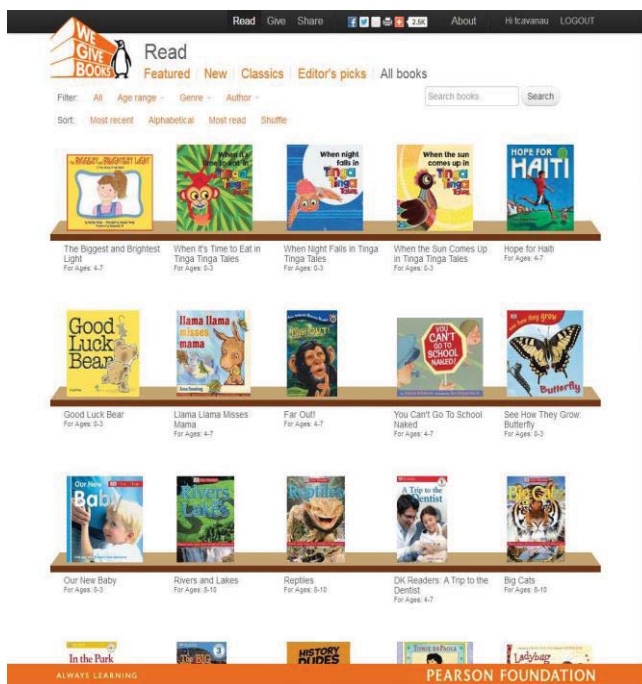
No matter the grade level of your students there are a number of great volunteer opportunities that might pique their interests and get them working on various topics.. For example, while many frown on Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>) as a viable research tool, students can not only read entries, but when they find errors or other needs, they can contribute and fix what is there.

### We Give Books

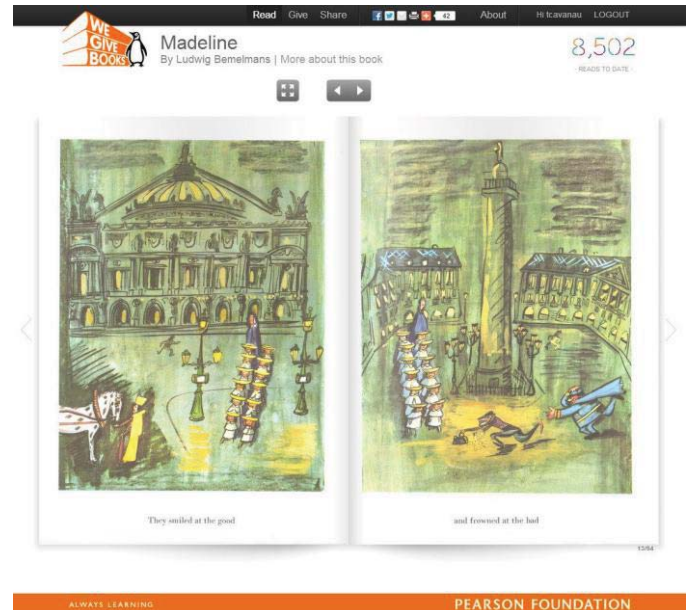
For younger students *We Give Books* is a great elementary-appropriate reading program that students can participate in. A child or the teacher can register to create an account. Then when a person reads one of the many books from an online children's collection, a physical book will be donated elsewhere to children. This literacy initiative from the Pearson Foundation & Penguin Group (<http://www.wegivebooks.org>), is relatively simple in its concept: a person reads an online children's book and Penguin will donate a book to a child or program in need. Students can also participate with the yearly *Read for My School* program where by reading books students also earn books for their own school.



The *We Give Books* free online collection has over 200 children’s picture books both fiction and nonfiction, identified by age levels that students can read online. The books are appropriate for children up to age ten, and include a good mix of read aloud and independent reading books. Users can sort the books displayed in the collection in various ways, such as by age range of the book, genre, title, or when they were added.



From there, it is a rather simple process. For the books to count, students (or associated adults) will need to join and create an account. You will have to be at least 13 years of age or older (if students are younger they can read using their teacher’s or parent’s account). Then students select from a few different ways to access the books list, such as the featured book, the new book or all the books and click on one to get more information. Once that book’s page opens you can read about that book and click on the “Read now” button to get started. The book will display in a two page format with arrows next to the book to change pages, and you can click on the book to zoom into the page. There is also a button to go full screen, displaying only the book’s pages. You can read these books with your class as a form of digital big book if your computer is connected to a projector. If you want to try without having an account (which also means not having books donated to others), you can read from the Editors Picks list - no login required.



## Donating Books

Students can also participate in giving their gently used books to others. Different organizations often will accept and share books. Online organizations like *Books for Soldiers* (<http://booksforsoldiers.com>) and *Operation Paperback* (<http://www.operationpaperback.org/>) will either accept books that they will send, or provide the shipping information for your class to send books. *LibraryThing Local* (<http://librarything.com>) raised money just by meeting and they partnered with *Books Matter* to send donated books to schools in Ghana. *Libraries without Borders* (<http://www.librarieswithoutborders.org/donate-books/>) will also accepted donated books that are in good condition.

## Reading Question Cards

One service learning project that my own students did to help others with their reading was to create a set of reading question cards ([http://www.flreads.org/adolescent\\_lit/question\\_cards/](http://www.flreads.org/adolescent_lit/question_cards/)). These question cards can be used with any number of reading activities such as literature circles, book clubs, or other book discussions to help guide students. The cards are available for download and printing or can be accessed through an online random card generator. My students created the cards for younger students by using an online tool at BigHugeLabs ([www.bighugelabs.com](http://www.bighugelabs.com)) to make their question cards with the Trading Card tool.



There are two sets of cards: a non-fiction collection of cards with a question for either non-fiction or biography, and the fiction collection which has questions about the story, plot, theme, characters, or about the reader's thoughts, and a few extra blank cards that students or teachers can use to start creating their own. If you want to print your own question cards to use in a classroom, download the question-card sheets from the FRA website, then print them out onto card stock paper. If you want to have the card with backs, re-print your card sheets with the cardback-fiction and cardback-nonfiction PDFs so that the cardback images are on the opposite side of your question cards. Next cut out your cards. It is really helpful if you want to keep using them to seal them in some way, such as by laminating them. If you want to use the online random card, click on either the Non-Fiction or Fiction reader on the side and a card will show up on the screen, click on the card to get a new random card.

So as you start the new school year, think about how students today, even in their classes or at home, can volunteer to help others with their reading, sometimes just by reading something for themselves.

*Happy reading with technology.*



[Reading Question Cards](#)



## Fiction



### Conflict

*Did the author present the conflict of the book in a realistic context?*

*Were the characters' struggles addressed in a believable way*

Question courtesy of Lisa Ruffe | Image courtesy of MorgueFile.com

click image to change

FRA Question cards are available at [http://www.flreads.org/adolescent\\_lit/questioncards/](http://www.flreads.org/adolescent_lit/questioncards/)

