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Review: The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference: Processes and Perspectives for Effective Coaching

by Anne Ellen Geller

I had heard about Cathy Toll's *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference* because I've worked closely with middle school and high school literacy coaches in the Worcester (Massachusetts) Public Schools as a part of a Carnegie Corporation funded grant to Clark University and the Worcester Educational Partnership. The Schools for a New Society grant¹ funded similar initiatives in six other cities—Boston, Chattanooga, Houston, Providence, Sacramento and San Diego—and each city's partnership focused on slightly different goals. Worcester set out to create smaller learning communities within the city's large high schools, create changes in curriculum and instructional method, offer more professional development and more opportunities for dialogue about best teaching practices, and provide greater attention to literacy and numeracy across the curriculum (especially at the ninth-grade level). Each high school developed a literacy coach position², and I became a consultant, advisor, mentor, and co-learner to those literacy coaches. Literacy coaching work in public schools can be difficult when classes are large, teachers are frustrated, and bureaucracy rules at the district level. Yet literacy coaching work in the public schools can be equally satisfying when teachers work together to think through grade-wide or discipline-wide issues, new teachers are supported, and experienced teachers become interested in pedagogical experimentation.

What was my position at Clark University?, the Worcester literacy coaches would ask when I began working with them. "I have your job but on a college campus," I would reply. And I do believe that any writing center or writing program director who consults with colleagues on assignments or student writing, who is invited to departments to talk about students' writing in the discipline or the major, or who speaks into institution-wide curricular issues or assessment of literacy (what high

About the Author

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school literacy coaches face as a “school improvement plan” [Toll 182]) has the opportunity to work as a literacy coach. Readers who are not currently working with literacy coaches or with K-12 teachers might not see themselves as literacy coaches, but Toll’s book reminds us that as leaders on our campuses, we can make it our goal to develop our colleagues’ habits of mind and habits of interaction (16) around literacy issues we identify as important to all of us and to our students’ learning.

With every chapter I read of Toll’s book, I became more convinced that I would return to *The Literacy Coach’s Desk Reference* again and again just as she hopes coaches might, “to remind [myself] of important processes to use when coaching,” “as a review before going into a new or challenging situation or as an opportunity to fine-tune [my] practices as [I] reflect upon them” (5). But I’ve also decided I would offer the book to writing center tutors, in particular because of how Toll sets up each chapter—whether it is about how to arrange individual conferences with colleagues or how to gather information through questioning or how to facilitate disagreement—with an overview that presents “What,” “Why,” “How,” “To Think about in Advance,” “To Think about During,” and “To Think about After.” While the black-line masters of literacy coaching worksheets and records don’t feel that useful to me personally, for others they may provide structure for planning work with colleagues or keeping records of work with colleagues. Almost all chapters offer a transcript of a sample coaching conversation (smooth ones and difficult ones), what Toll calls a “vignette,” not a “script” (6). This is a book that offers ways of thinking about work with our teaching colleagues that is truly consonant with our writing center practices—deep listening, honest questioning, prioritizing co-learning and co-teaching, reflection, stewardship and leadership. This is also, then, a book that should remind us that we should always strive to take our best conferencing practices into our work beyond the writing center.

The Literacy Coach’s Desk Reference has seven sections and twenty-six chapters, much too much rich information to summarize here. But some chapters feel notable to me. I like the way Toll slows down the processes of individual conferences with colleagues, and separates how we might think about and plan for and reflect on that work as a series of chapters that build on one another: “Getting Started,” “Focusing,” “Gathering Information through Questioning,” “Setting Goals,” through “Planning for...” and “Forwarding...” the “Action.” In these chapters, discussions of “unproductive questions” (31) are interspersed with provocative stances of philosophy. Take the single question Toll uses to open her work with her colleagues, a question “that demonstrates recognition of teachers’

strengths and yet allows teachers to tell something about a struggle or challenge that they are encountering” (31): “When you think about the reading and writing you want your students to do, the teaching you want to do, and the classroom you want to have, what gets in the way?” (31) And consider Toll’s reflection on her own question: “This question assumes that teachers do indeed have a vision for their work and that they are indeed striving to make that vision a reality, but that things get in the way...the question recognizes teachers’ desire to succeed and to help their students succeed but also acknowledges that there are obstacles to this work” (31). It’s no surprise once we hear this to find the care Toll takes in focusing goals on students (50), in reminding readers that coaches shouldn’t step away from relationships when teachers are most successful if coaches hope to help sustain that teaching success (68), in demanding that we acknowledge the difference between “model” lessons that offer “best practices” and “demonstration” lessons that offer “possible practices” (156) and “further teachers’ movement toward their goals” (157).

I also appreciate the four chapters Toll devotes to difficult group dynamics in her section on Processes for Group Meetings. “Facilitating Disagreement,” “Addressing Varying Levels of Participation,” “Addressing Competing Claims,” and “Addressing Intimidation” present difficult scenarios we all face—the small group participant who attempts to dominate conversation or intimidate others, the “lone outlier” who is unlike the rest of a group in “perceptions, experiences or opinions” (105)—and discusses them for what they can teach us about teaching and learning with one another in groups. The literacy coach can “honor group members’ wishes to agree to disagree” or can take a risk and “challenge the disagreement” (107). Allowing groups to agree to disagree may be our attempt to keep everyone happily or comfortably involved in inquiry together, but Toll reminds us that “Addressing disagreement does not mean erasing it” (107), for “disagreement represents divergent views, and divergent views bring richness and variety to collaborative efforts” (107). “Literacy coaches can play important roles in helping members of a group tolerate difference and pay attention to their own reaction to it” (108), and “fair, open-minded, and respectful” coaches who are reflective can facilitate learning and help the group move ahead and even benefit from differences among its members” (109). There are too many situations to list—for example, the cross-disciplinary assignment workshops I’ve facilitated or committee meetings I’ve attended in which a faculty member with one view of student writing tried to intimidate others—in which I might now hear Toll’s advice in my head. True writing center leadership would require attention to these potentially divisive issues, and we can learn much from Toll’s book about how to attend to the “disagreement that is

essential for healthy, productive professional learning teams” (104) without giving up on collaboration.

In her conclusion to *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference*, Cathy Toll leaves us with a list of “concepts, beliefs, and practices” she’s “tried to emphasize” (207). First on the list is: “Literacy coaching is most effective when it begins with teachers’ interests, needs, and concerns, and, therefore, literacy coaches are wise to develop the habit of listening and learning before all else” (207). With this, Toll reminds me of William Ayers, who writes at the very beginning of *Teaching Toward Freedom*: “Teaching, at its best, is an enterprise that helps human beings reach the full measure of their humanity. Simple enough to say, and yet, in countless ways, excruciatingly difficult to achieve, and so it is worth restating and underlining” (1). *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference* is a rather simplistic reference book of process. But it is surprisingly complex for what it suggests about how slowly, thoughtfully and inquisitively literacy coaches, or writing center and writing program directors, for that matter, must collaborate with colleagues through the excruciating difficulty of teaching. To find the full measure of our own teaching humanity, Cathy Toll might say, we need to embrace and appreciate our own learning even as we embrace and appreciate the learning of others.

NOTES

¹ For a program overview, see <http://www.carnegie.org/sns/index.html>, and for Worcester see <http://www.carnegie.org/sns/pub/page13.html>.

² For more information about literacy coaching and more resources related to literacy coaching, see <http://www.ncte.org/collections/literacycoach> or <http://www.literacycoachingonline.org>.

WORKS CITED

Ayers, William. *Teaching Toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.