Story Seeking: An Approach for Literacy Coaching

Phyllis A. Blackstone, EdD

The concept of coaching has invaded American society. One cannot advance very far in learning any skill without encountering an advertisement promoting the use of a coach to attain one's goals. The education sector has embraced the concept as well. The athletic coach is no longer the solitary coach in a school.

This paper examines the role of the literacy coach, the most recent personnel addition to numerous school districts. A critical and essential skill for the literacy coach is to develop positive, trusting relationships with the teacher being coached.

The author proposes that the literacy coach could establish positive, trusting relationships with teachers through the strategy of story seeking. While storytelling has been proven to be a useful strategy in many corporate and professional realms, the concept of story seeking is a way to learn the unique professional and personal characteristics and experiences of the teacher being coached. It is in discovering one's story that the coach is able to gain insight and build essential coaching relationships.

The paper concludes with a story grammar template for coaches that could guide the story seeking process.

The view from the Mount Battie fire tower in Camden, Maine is spectacular. One is able to view sweeping vistas of the Atlantic Ocean, multiple islands and harbors dotted with boats of every kind. One morning in 2006, while on sabbatical for the purpose of examining issues of literacy coaching, I was enjoying the early morning view, learning against a huge granite rock, savoring my coffee. A family of three, father, mother and small son, arrived at the tower. The child was awed by the immensity of the tower and wanted to ascend to the top. Dad agreed to accompany him and Mom would remain with the camera to take a picture of them from the top of the tower. The child raced up the steps with eagerness only to find that he was not tall enough to see over the wall when he got to the top. Hid dad picked him up so the boy could see the view. What the child saw was a wide vastness and a plunging drop to the ground. He became afraid, started to cry and resisted as his father tried to hold him for a picture. The child became more agitated despite his father's attempts to comfort him. Finally, cradling the child's head so they could look into each other's eyes, the dad said, with words of confidence and comfort, "I've got you. I'll be holding you the whole time!" At this, the child looked deeply into the face of this parent who had proven his trustworthiness for all of his earthly life, relaxed into his father's chest and produced a smile for his mother's picture.

This story is reminiscent of a coaching relationship between literacy coaches and classroom teachers. Just like this little boy loved the adventure of the new location, had a desire to ascend to greater heights and realized fear as dangers presented themselves, the classroom teacher has also experienced the opportunity, eagerness, thrill and fear of rising to greater heights for a more panoramic view. The literacy coach is the most recent professional in the arsenal of specialists who is available to accompany the teacher through this journey of uncharted territory. The literacy coach becomes a co-collaborator and co-learner with the teacher in providing the best instruction that will increase student literacy achievement. The coach must possess a thorough, comprehensive understanding of literacy processes and an accompanying repertoire of strategies to offer the classroom teacher. When the teacher becomes overwhelmed and afraid, the coach is the one who must secure the teacher's trust and be able to say, "I'm here for you. I'll be supporting you the whole time."

The current literature on literacy coaching maintains that for successful coaching to occur, the development of a consistently positive, trusting relationship between the coach and teacher must be fostered and maintained (Barkley, 2005; Dozier, 2006; Duncan, 2006; Toll, 2005; Moran, 2007; Puig & Forelich, 2007; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). While this mandate is expected and appreciated, the development of positive, trusting relationships is not always easy. It is a process fraught with barriers from prior experiences, past history, lack of procedural knowledge in developing relationships and limited language facility. The purpose of this article is to suggest that storytelling and story seeking may be a vehicle for developing coaching relationships.

The Case For Story Seeking As A Strategy For Coaching

Storytelling is a time-honored tradition of teaching and learning. Our ancestors, prior to the invention of the printing press, learned from the oral storytelling practiced in their cultures. Throughout generations, people have gathered knowledge and established traditions based upon the stories told to them by their forefathers. Stories allow us to remember the past, interpret the present and dream about the future (Mathews, 2008). Yashinsky (2004) suggests that just as we are born into houses made of brick and wood, we are also born into houses made of stories, memories and sayings which mark the crossroads of past, present and future. Indeed, we are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell (McAdams, et al. (2006). Truly, the brain seems "wired" to respond to stories. Consider the child, young person or adult who "perks up" and attends to a story when it is inserted in an otherwise boring lecture, sermon or homily. Stories grab our attention, engage our senses and through them, we make connections to our own world. In the world of pedagogy, the function of a story is to "provide a vehicle that allows the storyteller to communicate a set of image that can constitute an end in themselves or, in turn, communicate a specific point of view, moral principle or other didactic desire to his or her audience." (Mathews & Wacker, 2008, p. 40).

In summary, in his book, Story Proof, Haven (in press) presents the case that stories are more effective and powerful than any other narrative structure. He asks the reader to consider the following:

Humans have told, used, and relied on stories for over 100,000 years. Written communication began only 6,000-7,000 years ago. Modern expository forms of argument, persuasion, and logic developed well after that. Most western cultures began, en masse, to read and write only a few hundred years ago. Before that, oral stories were the dominant from through which history, news, values, cultural heritage, and attitudes were passed from person to person and from generation to generation.

.....Stories eve predate language. In the beginning there were stories. Than came language to express story concepts. Then came written language with its grammar and syntax. Only much later did other narrative and expository forms emerge. Evolutionary biologists confirm that 100,000 years of reliance on stories has evolutionarily hardwired a predisposition into human brains to think in story terms. We are programmed to prefer stories and to think in story structures.

Every culture in the history of this planet has created stories: myths, fables, legends, and folktales. Not all have developed codified laws. Not all have created logical argument. Not all have created written language and exposition. All developed and used stories." (*Excerpt from Story Proof (in press) by Kenall Haven, published by the National Storytelling Network in Storytelling Magazine, May/June, 2008, pp.33-35)*

So, how could storytelling be useful in the process of developing the positive, trusting relationships between coaches and teachers? Stories of all kinds provide examples and metaphors for instruction. The same storytelling strategy that can provide lessons to students can also be used to provide lessons to teachers. However, the intent of this article is to suggest that coaches include the practice of story seeking as they work with teachers. Story seeking is defined, for the purpose of this article, as a procedure for noticing and eliciting the stories that guide teacher beliefs and behaviors in the classroom. For this author, the idea of story seeking derived from the work of Robert Coles (1989). In his book, The Call Of Stories, he conveys a message from his mentor who first suggested to him that counselors should learn the stories of the ones they counsel. Coles' mentor suggested that one " be a good listener in the special way a story requires: note the manner of presentation, the development of plot, character; the addition of new dramatic sequences; the emphasis accorded to one figure or another in the recital; and the degree of enthusiasm, of coherence the narrator gives to his or her account." (Coles, 1989, p.23). Further writings by Goodson (2005) and McAdams, et al (2006) support the use of personal narratives.

McAdams, et al (2006) suggest that "people find meaning and purpose in their lives through the construction, internalization and constant revision of life narratives." Goodson (2005) posits that because stories make experiences concrete, they are useful as a starting point of collaboration. His concept of "storying the self" is a concept for using stories in educational study. Kurtz & Ketcham (1992) found that stories have a way of touching the human spirit. That is, stories can become mirrors of human "be—ing", reflecting our own essence and when telling one's own story, one owns the story that is told.

A problem with seeking another's story or giving one's story is the dilemma of knowing which story to give. Each of us has several stories. The story of life is not linear, integrated and coherent in one massive monologue but several stories within a number of possibilities. (McAdmas, et al, 2006). Indeed, the stories we hear as story seekers are bits and pieces of life stories from which we infer information and perhaps find a pathway to another part of the story. Goodson (2005) cautions that listening to one's story is not sufficient but the telling of the story becomes a starting point for collaboration between the storyteller (teacher) and the story listener (coach).

The habit of seeking stories from teachers allows the coach the opportunity to gather vital information about the teacher. When a coach finds a story (or bits and pieces of stories), the embedded information is not just about the professional life of the teacher. The story incorporates personal beliefs and feelings too. The coach must be responsive to the "whole" teacher, that is, the professional and personal lives of the teacher.

Story seeking allows an additional benefit for the coach. In times of crisis, disagreement and professional chaos, story seeking is a way to collect all the stories embedded within the difficulty and lay them out objectively for collegial discussion. In his book, Difficult Conversations, Stone and his colleagues (1999) explain the three conversations within each single conversation: the "what happened" conversation, the "feelings" conversation and the "identity" conversation. The "what happened?" conversation is the dialogue spoken aloud and includes the "truth assumption" (conversationalists hear the same words but create interpretations and assumptions based on their own background knowledge and limited knowledge of the other participants in the conversation), the "intention invention" (assumptions, whether true or untrue are assigned to the hidden intentions of the other speaker) and the "blame frame" (assignment of blame to those guilty and the ones who need to "fix" the situation). The "feelings" and "identity" conversations are not spoken aloud but are active within the realm of inner thought. Feelings certainly are a critical part of any coaching relationship but if feelings are prohibited from expression and exploration, the purpose of the coaching experience can be thwarted. The "identity" conversation concerns the conversationalists' private perceptions of self-image and how this difficult circumstance and resultant conversation will impact outsiders' views of one's competence.

Stone et al suggest that a manageable way out of a difficult conversation is to advance toward the exploration of the others' stories. They suggest that we accept that we each notice different things and are influenced by particular experiences and move into a stance of curiosity. Curiosity is the highway to another's story. When one is curious about why another believes in something different or behaves a certain way, one seeks to understand why. Stone suggests that we conscientiously and mindfully learn their stories. How can this be accomplished? Stone suggests that the participants begin with the third story. The third story is the one that a keen observer would tell. This story relates the facts as observed and omits any emotional, personal feelings. It is the "just the facts, ma'am" story. Once a conversationalist thinks like a mediator and sets the purpose of pursuing a joint exploration, stories can be used to resolve the difficult circumstances.

A Practical Template For Story Seeking

In considering a practical template for literacy coaches to use while seeking stories from their teachers, readers are invited to consider the organized structure called story grammar. Story grammar is the "mainstay" organization by which teachers instruct students from kindergarten to college about the elements of story. Young children are taught the story grammar of beginning, middle and end. As children increase in their understanding and experience with stories, teachers provide more formal language like characters, setting, plot, conflict, attempts to resolve conflict and resolution. As students study story during middle and high school years, they learn more sophisticated techniques such as voice, theme, style, point of view, foreshadowing and flashbacks. Story grammar is deeply embedded into the curriculum, across grade levels and disciplines.

Literacy coaches are invited to use the story grammar framework to seek the stories from classroom teachers

that can be used as a starting point for promoting teacher growth and coaching insights. However, as easy as it may seem, using story grammar as a tool for learning about teachers can be a massive undertaking. Where would a coach begin? Further, coaches do not usually begin to coach a teacher at the beginning of the teaching profession but at some point in the teacher's own professional and personal story. By examining the elements of the teacher's story, a coach will be more likely to learn the larger context of the story, thereby creating a situation for the coach to respond to the "whole" teacher (the personal, emotional, physical, spiritual and professional dimensions).

A way for the coach to organize the "bits and pieces" that are part of a "whole" teacher's story is to categorize by the story elements themselves: characters, setting, plot, conflicts, attempts to resolve the conflicts and resolution. In the following pages, the elements are discussed separately and sample questions are presented to assist the coach in seeking the teacher's story.

Setting:

Every story has a setting and some have a variety of settings. Every classroom teacher lives, works and plays in a variety of settings. The literacy coach and classroom teacher meet in the educational setting. When a coach enters the educational setting, especially the particularly personal space of the teacher, "bits and pieces" of the teachers story are evident. Attention to the setting is critical. The setting includes the arrangement and components of the physical space but the climate of the setting as well. The climate refers to the "emotional feel" of the space and can be determined by the use and style of language within the space. The emotional climate can be inferred from spoken dialogues and interactions among students and adults. Positive, encouraging, respectful actions and language attest to a healthy emotional climate. The classroom teacher is the leader who sets the standards for the setting. The observant coach can discover hints to the teacher's story from the setting.

Some questions the coach may consider about the setting in seeking the teacher's story are as follows:

- *What are the physical, emotional and social factors within this setting the impacts the teacher's work in the classroom?*
- *What have previous teaching settings been like for this teacher?*
- *How has this teacher experienced success in this and other settings?*
- *How has this teacher experienced disappointment and discouragement in this and other settings?*
- *What is the teacher's perception of the settings beyond this classroom, that is, the school, district and community?*
- *How does the teacher bring her personal story into the setting?*
- *How is this setting a positive place for students?*
- *How is this setting a challenging place for students?*

Character

Coaching is all about a focus on the characters. The teacher, of course, is the main character and the one supported by the coach. The pupils in the classroom, other practitioners who participate in the classroom and external administrators are all part of the cast of characters included in the teacher's story. The observant coach will notice the interactions between the teacher and all of the others who intersect during the days and months of teaching. Some questions that may help the coach understand the coach's stories are as follows:

- *What is the teacher's personality like?*
- *What are the teacher's strengths?*
- *What are the teacher's challenges?*
- *What are the teacher's interests?*
- *What is special about this teacher?*
- *How is this teacher gifted?*
- *What is the nature of the interactions this teacher has with students, other adults, parents and administrator?*

Style

Style, or how the story is told verbally and non-verbally, overlaps with the personality traits of the teacher. The teacher's story is issued through a particular style of communication. For some, the style is more open and for others, the style is more private and closed. The coach respects the teacher's style of communication and patiently works within that style to discover "bits and pieces" of a teacher's story. Some teachers are very careful to take time to observe the coach's communication style and develop a relationship of trust before communicating important details of their stories. Sample questions that a coach may consider are:

- *What is characteristic about this teacher's style of communication?*
- *Does this teacher's style follow a particular pattern?*
- *How does this teacher approach a conversation about a professional topic?*
- *Does this teacher show a willingness to embrace new ideas?*
- *Does this teacher seem defensive and unwilling to accept new ideas?*
- *What does this teacher want from the literacy coach?*
- *What does this teacher expect from the literacy coach?*
- *What have been this teacher's experiences with previous coaches?*
- *What brought this teacher and coach together?*
- *Do the teacher and the coach have compatible personalities?*
- *Do the teacher and the coach have compatible beliefs and interests?*
- *What is the nature of the age and experience gap between the teacher and the coach?*
- *Do the teacher and the coach feel comfortable with one another?*

Plot

In a story, the plot includes the action from the beginning to the end, including the conflict or problem and the attempts to resolve the problem. In learning the story of the classroom teacher, the coach uses an objective eye and ear to understand the entire context of an issue at hand. For example, if the issue is teaching various text structures in the content area, the coach will wonder about the teacher's previous experiences with the topic, including the condition and beliefs that allowed success or failure to occur for certain students. While a coach may be working on an issue that seems singular and easily solvable, other "sub-problems" may arise and complicate the coach's work. For example, with the issue of text structures in content areas, the coach may discover that the teacher does not have a firm grasp of the various text structures when they are mixed within a text or are not clearly written. The issues that then arise include a more comprehensive knowledge of identifying text structures within a variety of texts and strategies to assisting students to understand a text even when the text structure is faulty. Questions related to the plot include:

- *What actions are happening in the classroom, instructionally, socially, procedurally, that should be happening?*
- *What actions are happening in the classroom, instructionally, socially, procedurally, that should not be happening?*
- *What can be modified to improve learning?*
- *Why does the teacher engage in the instructional, social and procedural actions in this way?*
- *What is the primary issue or issues for the teacher?*
- *What previous experiences has this teacher had with these issues?*
- *What are the teacher's beliefs about these issues?*
- *What are the "sub-issues" that require attention?*
- *What does the teacher want to change and why?*
- *What has the teacher tried and what were the results?*
- *What are the conditions under which success has been shown?*
- *What is impeding a clear understanding of the issue?*
- *What is impeding change?*

Resolution

Most narratives conclude when the resolution is reached. Resolutions are not necessarily endpoints but can be beginnings of new stories. With every resolution, another segment of the story is told and new stories grow. The teacher's story has incorporated a new dimension. The coach's story has also added a new link that can be

shared and connected with stories of other educators. The stories, captured in print and shared with others, can develop a life of their own, informing effective practice long after the coach and teacher are retired.

Questions for probing the resolution include:

- *What is an acceptable resolution for this issue?*
- *What are some ways to arrive at a resolution?*
- *What resources or help must be secured to get to this resolution?*
- *What steps must be followed?*
- *What kind of a timeline is needed?*
- *How will be resolution be evaluated?*
- *How will progress be monitored?*
- *What should happen next?*
- *What other personnel should be involved?*

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to make the case that storytelling can be turned to include story seeking as a device for literacy coaches to develop positive trusting relationships with classroom teachers. The intent of story seeking as device for coaching is not to be nosey and interfere with the personal life of a teacher. The intent is to use the personal and professional gifts, interests and characteristics of the teacher to guide the coaching. Coaches would be remiss in thinking that the person called teacher in the classroom will only respond to the coach in a professional way. The coach and teacher are people first, then professionals. When the coach takes the lead in learning, using and respecting the unique personal and professional story of the teacher, the relationship has the potential to become successful, long-lasting and effective.

The little boy at the top of the tower on Mount Battie became frightened at the magnitude of the world around him and the risk of falling. Classroom teachers can similarly be overwhelmed by all the duties, responsibilities and mandates imposed upon them. The coach is the one person who can assist in the journey and give assurance that "I'll be supporting you the whole time."

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Address correspondence to:

Phyllis A. Blackstone, EdD
Associate Professor of Education
Viterbo University
LaCrosse, WI

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