Teaching Literacy Leadership in Traditional and Online Eras

Ryan R. Kelly
Arkansas State University

Abstract: Teaching literacy leadership in either a traditional or online era requires that candidates make strategic decisions, build bridges among colleagues, and select from a palate of available literacy coaching models that fits their school context and identified goals. This article explores a theoretical framework guiding literacy leadership, data-driven program examination or evaluation by candidates, and the outcomes of their professional development sessions or proposals. It ultimately arrives at conclusions that permeate literacy leadership, the specific impact these conclusions have on the teaching of its practice, and a discussion of dispositional qualities at the core of quality candidate preparation.

Building Bridges and Being Flexible

Literacy leadership, or literacy coaching (used interchangeably throughout), carries the need to be a bridge builder. This early philosophical lesson in *Leadership in Literacy*—an advanced literacy coaching practicum/capstone course at a major mid-southern university—requires the constructivist demand of building and shaping knowledge together, making strategic decisions, and never alienating colleagues within the professional circle. This notion triggers many intriguing discussions and reflections upon struggles to build these bridges, and the realization of how things might be different today had building bridges been a priority. For some it comes as a sobering realization that those who may have been a barrier to literacy's progress in a school district must somehow become a vital part of resuming its course. For others the concept of building bridges takes the shape of patience and a slower pace of progress when rapid progress is the natural instinct. Some even find the unforeseen need to build spontaneous bridges when the necessary data to embark on literacy leadership is not immediately accessible. One must inevitably build bridges and form lasting, resilient, and reliable professional connections in literacy leadership, for they are the critical conduits through which the energies of the practice of literacy coaching flow.

Any quality teaching practice calls for a plan informed by a theoretical model. It seems logical that one need only employ the proper framework, conduct the necessary steps, and reap the analytical harvest. In reality, literacy leadership takes time and flexibility when things do not go according to plan. This flexibility, furthermore, often means restructuring the plan—be it the challenge of analyzing data that may not provide a complete picture, postulating courses of action for which no infrastructure exists, implementing professional

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development among school district personnel, or even proposing a viable option. *Leadership in Literacy* requires flexibility—a shock to the system for some. In an online era, this must happen virtually, in proposed form, and in an even shorter timeframe. To further confound the reality of *Leadership in Literacy*, the course once required that a process which normally takes years to be *conducted* during the short fieldwork phase of the course. Utilizing a theoretical backing and over a decade of reflective analysis of the teaching of literacy leadership, this the following will examine the experiences, challenges, and outcomes of program candidates in search of resulting insight into their successful dispositional qualities as future literacy coaches.

Leadership in Literacy on Course

Leadership in Literacy candidates are in-service teachers throughout the country employing or observing the course objectives in their own classroom and school district. As a capstone course, it begins with candidates closing in on the completion of their degree. *Leadership in Literacy* candidates immediately begin by examining theoretical models and considering them in the context of their school or district. Examination of a great deal of school district data potentially follows, with evaluation or examination meant to uncover not just the current status of literacy education in their school district, but the "next step" along the path (Kelly, 2011; Kelly, Martin, & Spillman, 2015). Most often, this program examination affirms a current plan or subsequent "next step" that is currently underway. Nominally, this also identifies a data-driven need for action, and through the appropriate choice of a theoretical model, a proposed "next step" for the school district.

Building bridges means building a case for this "next step." Candidates once conducted the first of two rigorously planned meetings, gatherings of professionals in their circle, to share the results of their program evaluation, and the "next step" for which they must make a solid pitch. Sharing the results of this program evaluation asked candidates to craft an engaging meeting where those gathered all collaborated, but the results of this process took center stage. This meeting took on the additional challenge of suggesting that "next step." The second was a professional development session designed to begin implementation of this "next step" with colleagues. Candidates anticipated problems, provided answers on the fly, perhaps further analyzed data, set goals for future work, and ultimately built the bridges to sustain their work past the end of the course and into their next school year. In the online era, this process is a highly accelerated program examination done in concert with a mentor (ideally a literacy coach or reading specialist), meant to feed proposed professional development and dispositional reflection. In either era, *Leadership in Literacy* culminates with a full evaluation or examination of the school's literacy program, and a reflection on the professional development endeavor, with an honest prediction on the lifespan of the course of literacy leadership they initiated—and a deeply personal dispositional reflection.

A Guiding Theoretical Model
Four Literacy Coaching Models

McKenna and Walpole (2008) offered the theoretical cornerstone for *Leadership in Literacy* that guides candidates in building their understanding of the task ahead. The authors wasted no time in testing the course's philosophy of being flexible when they asserted their certainty that "there is no one right coaching model for all settings, *and* there are models that would be poor choices" (p. 1). They expounded on professional standards of the International Literacy Association and other policy centers that call for strong, structured literacy leadership and advocacy. Shearer, Carr, & Vogt (2019) heavily leaned on the International Literacy Association 2017 standards in their position on this leadership and advocacy, as well. This underscores McKenna and Walpole's (2008) philosophy that "many problems in student achievement are likely related to poor instruction" (p. 3), hence the need for expertly trained literacy coaches to guide professionals in schools. They noted that "change coaches" must help administration and goals in the building; "content coaches" must help teachers and goals in the classroom (p. 3). They clarified, however, that coaches in reality must mediate both at the same time, should not separate the two, and should, therefore, consider coaching to be a process of advocating work with both areas as one. Four of their selected models of coaching (pp. 4-14) provide the most effective foundation for the candidates to broadly define an approach to their work (see Table 1)—once they have completed their district program examination:

Table 1. Four selected literacy coaching models of McKenna and Walpole (2008), noting their theoretical nature and origin, as well as their practitioner demands and use.

Coaching Model	**Theoretical Nature** ***and Origin***	**Practitioner Demands** ***and Use***
Cognitive Coaching	Of lesser demand and intrusiveness, this model inherently carries the need to "mediate the invisible thinking that guides a teacher's work" and facilitates self-directed professional action in one's own classroom (p. 5.). *The authors derive this model from Costa & Garmston, (2002).*	Candidates must become "literacy counselors" that support collaboration, inspire work outside of the traditional school day, and encourage active inquiry into quality teaching. *At the very least, elements of this model usually permeate any iteration of a candidate's chosen approach.*

Peer Coaching	This model employs a specific aim to target the conduit of implementation between professional development and teacher practice in the classroom. This model stems from administrative support, modeling by an expert (perhaps outsourced), and "engages the entire school staff to implement the strategy" and support one another (p. 7). *The authors derive this model from Joyce & Showers (1996).*	Candidates must draw on the skills they know as teachers: modeling and guided practice; they must remain flexible but prepare for individual support. Candidates must also support collaborative comfort and reciprocity of modeling, observation, teamwork, and continued implementation. *Adaptation by* Leadership in Literacy *candidates meant reliance on published literature, not employing an internal or external consultant.*
Program-Specific or Subject-Specific Coaching	This model stems from external goals, is "targeted and outcome oriented," and "target and outcome-oriented" and "is designed to equip an individual to implement a new program" (p. 10). This model is inherently meant for initial implementation of new goals. *The authors derive this model from Walpole & Meyer (2008).*	Candidates must focus less on specific strategies or classrooms, and more on larger issues in the data needing support. Candidates here find an increased challenge of pioneering new ground for their building and district, with perhaps greater risk. *In reality, candidates tended to employ this model with a known "next step" or to discuss a different course of action.*
Reform-Oriented Coaching	The authors call this model a "moving target" (p. 12). The model supports specific, financially supported, curriculum reform, and structured professional development. The model must "evolve and change as student data dictate" and requires the management of skillful, highly trained literacy specialists (p. 12). *The authors derive this model from a combination of Walpole & McKenna (2004); and Walpole & McKenna (2007).*	This highly demanding model in its true form would be too much for candidates to accomplish in one semester. Furthermore, it demands comprehensiveness and focused direction that is ultimately more than they can sustain alone or be expected to procure. *What candidates did with this model was make a case for its focused direction upon a known district objective lacking focus or increasing the comprehensiveness of a reform already underway.*

The above breakdown of these four theoretical models includes a glimpse at their conceptual nature, and the subsequent demands that each place upon the candidates.

Shearer, Carr, and Vogt (2019) offered six similar literacy coaching models that provide parallel or supplemental insight. The models of Informal Coaching, Mixed Model/Elements of Informal and Formal Literacy Coaching, Formal Literacy Coaching, Peer Coaching and

Mentoring, Cognitive Coaching, and Clinical Supervision (pp. 51-52) all support, as these authors asserted, conformity (i.e., alignment with standards), coaching in practice, or "coaching for transformation" (p. 50). Where candidates once identified a model that was the best fit for their assembled colleagues and the unfolding program evaluation, in the online era they have somewhat more flexibility. The most flexible candidates find ways to meld a pair of models or incorporate the finer aspects of several models in their professional development proposal.

Guidance, Motivation, Flexibility

Literature in the field offers examples that personify the data collection process, professional development demands, potential need for stronger systemic reforms, and testimonial to approaches done right. Multiple "do's and don't's" focus on working with administrators, teacher practices and beliefs, and trusting the data to guide them (Bean and DeFord, 2012). Dole (2004) further defined the role of coaching by modifying the "reading specialist" role under very specific school reform, a strong supplement to the Reform-Oriented Coaching Model. Morgan and Clonts (2008) focused attention on the specific development of school leadership teams to meet identified goals of achievement. Nilsson's (2008) analysis of informal reading inventories offered *Leadership in Literacy* candidates multiple specific tools to employ in their program evaluation or examination. Tatum (2004) shares coaching experience in a school "with a chronic pattern of low achievement, a school that initially did not have an exemplary reading program," with the goal of building "a cohesive system of professional development support" (p. 29). Impacting urban schools in Steckel's (2009) work helped place socioeconomic and cultural factors into perspective; this author specifically explores what is necessary to make the practice work in high-need areas. Turner, Applegate, and Applegate (2009) highlighted what ultimately makes literacy leaders successful: a personal belief in educational excellence, collaboration, and instructional practice.

Still further insight comes from Walpole and Blamey (2008) who took a close look at the multiple roles a coach must take, and how this is often in conflict with some potentially inflexible views of coaching; the authors seek a balance between helping the school's program and the teachers implementing it (e.g., a balance between Program-Specific and Peer/Cognitive Coaching Models). Rainville and Jones (2008) took an interesting direction in their examination of identity and power structures encountered in the work of the literacy coach, which have the potential to feed directly into the bridge-building concerns that mark the challenges in the Reform-Oriented Coaching model. Mokhtari, Rosemary, and Edwards (2007) suggested a decision-making framework to guide comprehensive school improvement teams in the data-driven quest for increased achievement. They also highlighted a successful district's use of data-driven decisions to create sustained growth in student achievement (Mokhtari, Thoma, & Edwards, 2009).

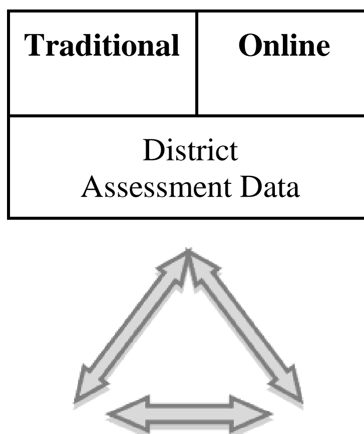
Leadership in Literacy Candidates in Action
Program Evaluation *and* Examination

With a supportive array of literature, class discussions, brainstorming, and conceptual goals in mind, *Leadership in Literacy* candidates once began their fieldwork with

a rigorous and rapid evaluation of their school district data—and now still examine a great deal. They typically begin this process by assimilating school and district context and identifying various data sets to build their "big picture" of their school's literacy program. Candidates work from McKenna and Walpole's (2008) view that curriculum is "the overall system of goals, strategies, and resources that are garnered to support student achievement" (p. 45). Candidates find varying degrees of success at accessing district data, as well. Most locate data on their own following teacher in-service meetings, as well as through vivid discussion with their mentor about scores, categories, students, and the standards guiding the instruction being measured.

Again, turning to McKenna and Walpole (2008), candidates remain mindful that as literacy leaders in schools with at least some active degree of data collection and assessment, it is important for them to shift their views on assessment "from design to interpretation," and to first evaluate if "the system is conceptually sound and useful for instruction" (p. 55). Candidates therefore sought triangulation of the findings in their literacy program evaluation through their variety of data sources—those they accessed, and those they employed themselves (Kelly, 2011; Kelly, Martin, & Spillman, 2015). Though some struggled with gaps in data, it most often gave them the credibility necessary to confidently enter their program evaluation meeting. Presently, as the professional development is only proposed, candidates have less anxiety over data access and greater flexibility in what they are able to propose. Ultimately, they similarly frame their examination of their school or district's literacy program around the following triangulation (see Figure 1) in order to articulate their impression of their district's "big picture," and identity the "next step" as a topic for their proposed professional development:

Figure 1. Typical Triangulation. This figure illustrates the analytical structure of both the former literacy program evaluation and current program examination process.



Traditional	Online
Curriculum and Existing Program Structure	Examination of Observation Experience

Traditional	Online
Survey and/or Self-Assessment	Mentor Conversations and Collaboration

Formerly, candidates held a first program meeting in their native school, typically in their own classroom, to share the results of their program evaluation with a gathering of key colleagues. With a "next step" under agreement and on the schedule, *Leadership in Literacy* candidates then planned and delivered a professional development session designed to support that "next step" and hopefully begin building momentum for continued steps beyond the *Leadership in Literacy* course. Presently, candidates develop an equally detailed program examination without the mandate to implement their proposed professional development.

Professional Development, Given *and* Proposed

Professional development sessions, once the second of their meetings, contained focused content that was a direct response or result of the program evaluation meeting. Shearer, Carr, and Vogt (2019) asserted that "teams with solid leadership result in capacity building," and teams "are affinity groups at their best" (p. 72). And they also use the term "community" loosely in their work to allow literacy coaches to "explore the concept in multiple and perhaps even novel ways" (p. 75). McKenna and Walpole (2008) suggested three levels of professional development interaction: one-on-one, small groups (fellow grade-level teachers, etc.), and large group settings or full faculty (p. 23). In both tradition and online eras, candidates maintain perspective on the reality that these meetings are "high stakes in that they put the coach, and sometimes the entire initiative, on stage" (p. 26).

Delivery of their professional development sessions occurred very much like the program evaluation meeting, in that candidates made use of their own classroom, and a delivery style desired by their colleagues. Meetings were dedicated strategy or concept development sessions with collaboration on infrastructure designed to continue the momentum of their program, or analysis of additional data consistent with their current program momentum. Where the program evaluation meetings were *data rich*, professional development sessions were *content* and *action rich*. In the online era, observation and mentor interaction provide *context rich* interaction that supports their proposed professional development and their dispositional reflection.

Potential Dispositional Qualities of Literacy Leaders

Literacy leadership requires data. Without question this must be a data-driven process. Bean and DeFord (2012) adamantly reminded literacy leaders to "let the data lead!" (p. 4). Insight from school district assessment data and teacher self-assessment data was

critical to informing both decisions and also the very *approach to the process* that begins to put events into motion. Observation and reflection in the online era have been equally critical to success. Data is the one of the purest available windows into student achievement. To engage in the literacy leadership process without relevant, current data is nothing less than flying blind into the process. *Leadership in Literacy* candidates were most prepared for their program evaluation meeting when they felt that they had the most complete picture of the data, and where "gaps" in the data were at a minimum. Any further examination into the required role of data in this professional practice will likely always link data availability with literacy leader or coach's success in the process.

Literacy leadership requires strategic decisions. Professionals in this practice must be able to make strategic decisions about coaching models, use of data, scheduling, means of personally and professionally engaging with colleagues, and the timing of conclusions that might challenge existing agendas. *Leadership in Literacy* candidates continue to distinguish themselves by building bridges. This often results in an extended timeframe required to accomplish targeted work. Though immediacy may seem preferable, retaining the "buy-in" and collaboration of all colleagues involved is paramount. Strategic decisions in this context become less about *what to do*—which is often suggested by the data—and more about *how to work with people* to accomplish the goal at hand. Strategic decision-making then becomes an act at the heart of the "leadership" in literacy leadership.

Literacy leadership requires courage. As McKenna and Walpole attest, this practice places the literacy coach and initiative in the spotlight (Walpole & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Walpole, 2008). This is not at all easy and placing oneself on the professional and collegial center stage may be contrary to some personality types. Literacy leadership "requires a kind of professional courage, stepping outside a comfort zone, and taking risks in full view of colleagues" (Kelly, 2011, p. 9). Courage, like the development of any other kind of active behavior or active thinking, requires small steps, small victories, and its own momentum. Conducting a program evaluation meeting prior to the professional development meeting provided a chance to refine professional approaches, build momentum working with colleagues, and showcase valid data and what it can do.

Literacy leadership requires passion. Ultimately, literacy leadership "requires a professional passion shared by all educators: the desire for student success" (Kelly, 2011). Any professional education circle contains this passion somewhere within. Regardless of how different a literacy leader may feel compared to their colleagues, each are driven by this same passion. As a common professional thread, it will bind the group together with proper cultivation and activation. And, when it comes to the implementation of goals identified by this practice, all educators have a stake in literacy, and any educator can contribute to a school district's mission in literacy. *Leadership in Literacy* candidates admirably embrace this passion—a testament to their continued professionalism.

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About the Author

Ryan R. Kelly is a Professor of Reading at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas. His research interests are literacy coaching, New Literacies practices, reading comprehension, and qualitative methodology.