

Leading Literacy with the C.O.A.C.H. Framework

When we come into classrooms with curiosity, our minds are open to possibility.

By Matt Renwick

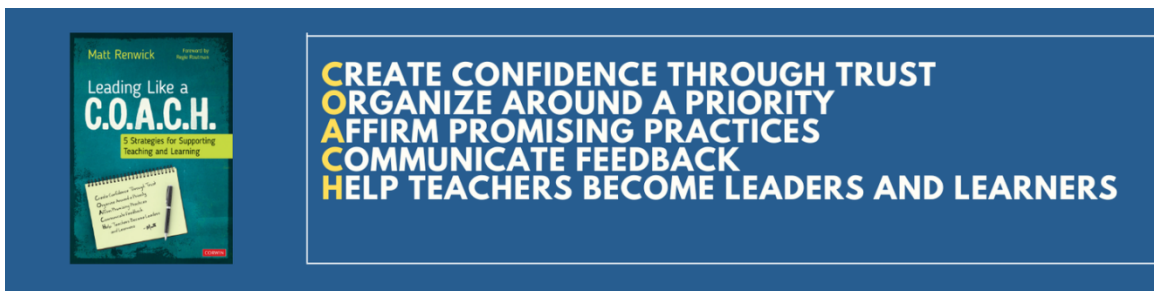
You probably already know this, but your classroom walkthroughs and formal observations are not working as you might hope. Yes, they can be effective in evaluating your overall schoolwide literacy initiative. Yet checklists and rubrics are evaluative. They are designed to judge whether or not an action or an experience is meeting agreed upon expectations.

To get to a desired state, improvement has to occur. And people improve not because they are mandated to, or because they will receive a low score if they do not, but because they want to and they believe in the opportunity for improvement.

I am not advocating for getting rid of our classroom observational tools (and they are *way* better than what we had previously). What I suggest is to see your leadership as a true practice, just as a teacher or any other professional might. To have a practice, leaders need strategies. Here are five that have helped me and our school improve:

- C--Create **Confidence** Through Trust
- O--**Organize** Around a Priority
- A—**Affirm** Promising Practices
- C—**Communicate** Feedback
- H—**Help** Teachers Become Leaders and Learners

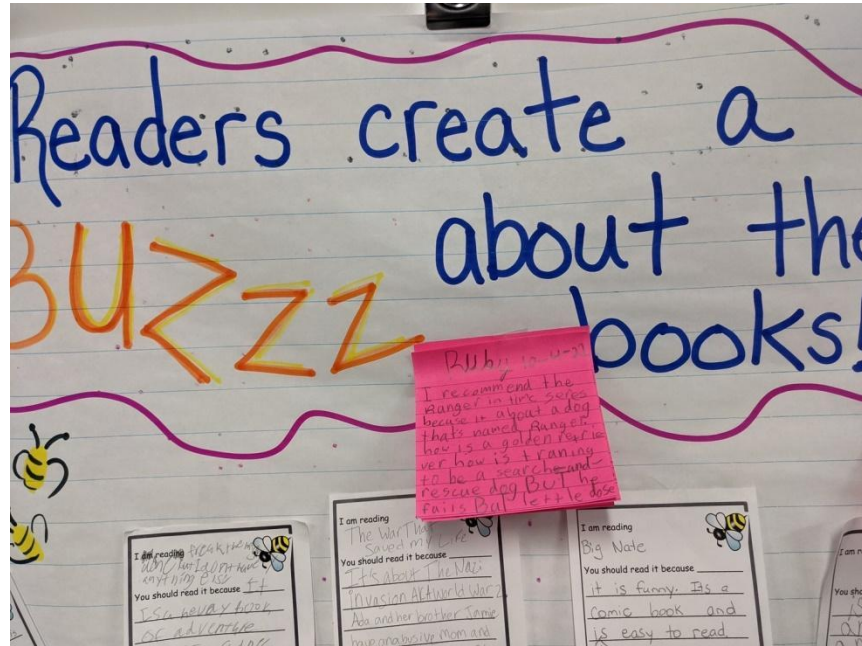
Next is an example of how this framework helps guide my interactions with teachers.



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Example: Creating Connections Across Classrooms

While walking in a 4th grade classroom, I noticed the students' "Book Buzz" bulletin board. One recommendation caught my eye.



Ruby recommended the *Ranger in Time* series by Kate Messner. Her enthusiasm for the books was evident in the multiple sticky notes she needed to review them. The teacher confirmed my inference. "Oh, she is really into that series."

While I was happy to see Ruby's engagement with reading, I was also interested in connecting Ruby with another student. This student, in another grade level, struggled to find books to get into. The teacher also shared with me that he liked dogs. I replied that I heard the *Ranger in Time* series¹ was good. "But I haven't read it," I confided.

Now I had an expert on this series - Ruby- as well as a peer likely effective in persuading the less engaged reader to pick up a book. So I asked Ruby: "Would you mind sharing which book in the series this student might want to start with?" She walked with purpose to the other classroom to make her recommendation.

Breaking it down...

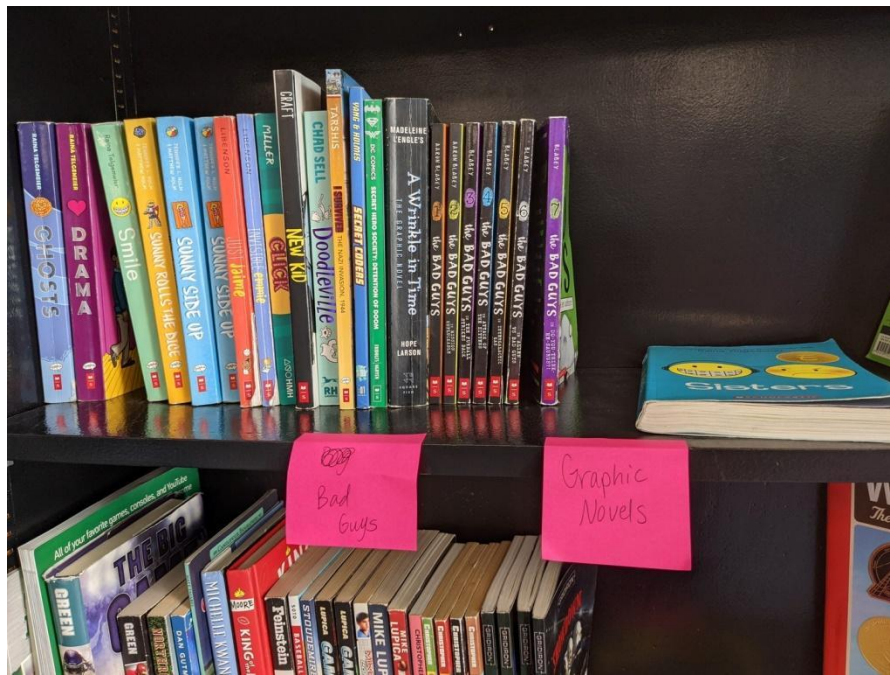
While this experience was brief, a lot more went into making it successful. The C.O.A.C.H. framework helped me facilitate it with the teachers.

Creating Confidence Through Trust

I am in classrooms daily - largely with a mindset toward curiosity. Judgement is reserved for formal observations. In this first month of school, I have not even taken notes other than brief affirmations I email or put in teachers' mailboxes.

Because I am not there to judge but to simply notice and name from an appreciative stance, teachers begin to trust my presence over time. They know I am there with positive intentions.

For example, in Ruby's classroom, I had acknowledged how the teacher had designed her reading space with her students in mind. In the other student's classroom, I had recognized the teacher's decision to invite her students to co-organize the classroom library.



Leaders too often assume teachers are confident in their decision-making. Yet they are just like anyone else: not always confident about the impact their choices have on others. By first celebrating their successes, we not only develop trust in each other; they also begin to trust themselves as professionals. That's confidence.

Organize Around a Priority

Confidence increases when we articulate our schoolwide instructional beliefs. What do we currently believe is effective instruction for all students? This is the priority.

We adopted the literacy framework developed by Regie Routman². It describes the most promising practices for teaching readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators.

One of the elements within this framework is “Environment”. Classroom libraries and a safe space for kids are a part of this element. As a faculty, we agreed to revise this part of our framework and add “co-organized” to classroom libraries.

Environment: Co-developed, excellent classroom libraries; equitable access to books, resources and charts flexible seating and opportunities for movement; peacefulness, joy, safety, risk taking, high trust levels, established routines

When I visit classrooms now, I can both expect to see this implemented in every learning space as well as celebrate everyone’s efforts around environment. The priority is clear.

Affirm Promising Practices

Affirmation sometimes has a less-than-stellar reputation. Think Al Franken’s recurring sketch for Saturday Night Live, *Daily Affirmations with Stuart Smalley*: “I am good enough, I am smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.”

True affirmations acknowledge others when they reach a goal. Affirmations also validate a person’s efforts toward expectations. They are grounded in evidence and aligned with promising practices as described previously.

For example, prior to asking for Ruby’s help, I noticed and named the “Book Buzz” poster activity the teacher had facilitated. “Ruby was clearly engaged in writing her book review - look how many sticky notes she has!” The term “Engagement” is part of our instructional framework.

Communicate Feedback

When I have led workshops for leaders on the C.O.A.C.H. framework, one activity I have them work through is ordering the types of feedback, from most effective to least effective. According to Art Costa and Robert Garmston³, the type of feedback that most likely leads to self-directedness is **mediative questions**. The intent of mediative questions is “to cause the coachee to supply the data from her own internal and external observations”.

For the teacher with the student who was struggling to become an engaged reader, I withheld advice. Instead I asked her, “I noticed you and your students are co-organizing the chapter books by categories. How is that going for your students?”

This question prompted the teacher to share her felt difficulty with this one student. She was looking for more strategies to help him. Once she made it clear that putting ideas on the table was okay, I shared a series that I had observed other students enjoying (*Ranger in Time*). In other words, I respected her capacity for solving this challenge vs. assuming I had all the answers.

Help Teachers Become Leaders and Learners

This final leadership strategy is more of a meta-strategy: a conglomeration of actions that can lead to professionals becoming more collaborative and self-directed.

For Ruby's teacher, she believes that guiding students to write book recommendations and to read independently for extended periods of time has a positive impact. In addition,

- She looks first to herself and grounds her decisions in our literacy beliefs to implement these practices.
- When asked if I can share her practices with others, she is comfortable with others seeing her as a leader.
- The book buzz poster is something new to her classroom; I assumed she learned about it from another teacher.

For the other teacher, she conveyed **trust and confidence** by expressing her challenges with me, the principal. We share a mutual **priority** of supporting all students to become more independent and engaged readers. By **affirming** the promising practices noticed in her classroom, she is more confident in her decision-making. The feedback **communicated** between the two of us - reciprocal, not delivered – eventually led her to seek out these books from another teacher in the school.

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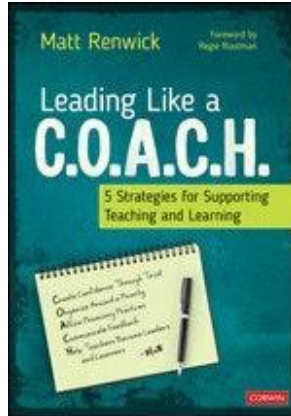
Conclusion: Tests Don't Teach

The late, great Grant Wiggins offers the following guidance on assessment tasks⁴:

"Authenticity is essential, but authenticity alone is insufficient to create an effective assessment task. The design of assessment tasks will depend on a host of related decisions...and, most important, the tasks must tell us how students are doing in relation to specific achievement targets. Thus, *assessment tasks are not instructional activities*."

While specific to student assessment, the same idea seems to apply for teacher evaluation.

As leaders, we will not be able to evaluate our way to schoolwide literacy success. Additional support seems necessary if we want to see true instructional improvement. The framework presented here offers a pathway toward achieving this success. What makes it powerful is, at its core, it respects the professionalism of teachers while facilitating continuous learning for everyone in the school. Leaders included.



Learn more about this framework and how to lead like a coach below.

[Learn More](#)

Endnotes

- 1 You can view the whole *Ranger in Time* series by Kate Messner on Goodreads [here](#).
- 2 The instructional framework can be found on p. 297 in [Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success](#) by Regie Routman (ASCD, 2014).
- 3 From p. 53 of [Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-Directed Leaders and Learners](#) by Art Costa and Robert Garmston (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
- 4 From p. 30 of *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance* (Jossey-Bass, 1998).