Fulfilling the Promise of Literacy Coaches in Urban Schools: What Does It Take to Make an Impact?

Barbara Steckel

In this article, the author uses a case study to discover what successful literacy coaches do to help teachers improve reading and writing instruction and to promote a culture of adult learning in schools.

Unlike more traditional modes of professional development, coaching is embedded within schools and classrooms and is responsive to the specific challenges faced by teachers in their daily work with students. If it is true that learning is best facilitated through active involvement and by thinking about and discussing what is being learned, then this constructivist approach should apply to teachers as much as to any other group of learners (Lieberman, 1995). In particular, teachers need opportunities to practice skills while receiving feedback and to reflect and collaborate with other colleagues working to improve student learning and achievement.

There is a strong expectation that embedded professional development characterized by opportunities for collaboration will improve instructional practices and student achievement across academic content areas. This may explain why coaching has come to be considered such a promising element of school reform.

Coaching in the Literature

While coaching as a form of professional development has grown over the past decade, the literature is lagging behind and consists largely of handbooks for the profession and guidelines setting out professional standards. This literature describes the range of a coach’s responsibilities associated with the role (Dole & Donaldson, 2006; International Reading Association, 2000, 2004, 2006; Roller, 2006; Toll, 2005; Walpole & Blamey, 2008), categorizes the coach’s requisite knowledge base (Casey, 2006; Toll, 2006; Walpole & McKenna, 2005), articulates standards and qualifications to guide the professionalization of coaching (International Reading Association, 2003, 2004, 2006), and begins to analyze the nuanced social interactions (Rainville & Jones, 2008) involved in changing the beliefs and instructional practices of other adults in the workplace (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Rodgers & Pinnell, 2002).

To help coaching fulfill its promise, we must learn more about what it actually takes for coaches to make an impact, especially within high-need schools. Given the growth of this new role, we have the opportunity to learn from the experience of coaches who have, and have not, made an impact. What did successful coaches do to help teachers improve reading and writing instruction and to promote a culture of adult learning within schools? What did schools and districts have to do to enable that to happen?

This last question, in particular, has been largely overlooked in the literature. It is essential to consider coaching in the context in which it occurs. The embedded nature of coaching makes it a powerful agent of change but also often frustrates its success. We must study the characteristics of the leadership, management, and organizational systems that enable coaches to initiate and sustain positive change.

This article begins to fill these gaps in the literature through case studies of two successful coaches and the context in which their work took place. These case studies were part of a broader project to create living portraits of the work of four coaches in...
urban schools in Massachusetts and New York. While the coaches in the larger study met with varied degrees of success, this article focuses on coaches who helped to change instructional practices and overall school culture. These case studies enable us to begin to identify the beliefs and practices of coaches who have made an impact on urban schools and, in the leadership, of management and organizational systems that have facilitated their success.

The Case Study Format
In the original study, conducted during the spring and fall of 2002, I shadowed four coaches working in urban schools in four cities in Massachusetts and New York. The case study format made it possible to develop a detailed, living picture of the day-to-day work of these coaches.

Overview of Case Study 1
The first coach, Pam (all names in this article are pseudonyms), was a full-time literacy coach in a large urban school system. At the time, Pam had been working in this school system for five years and had 10 years of experience in education. She worked as a classroom teacher and special educator with dual certification in special and elementary education, as a trained literacy coordinator for grades 3 through 5, and as a Reading Recovery teacher.

The case study focused on Pam’s work in a small neighborhood K–5 elementary school serving a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. This study targeted her work with two veteran teachers, one of grade 4 and one of grade 5. Pam coached at this site one day per week, or forty days over the school year. She covered four city schools overall, with one day per week in each school and one day per week for district professional development that was provided for the coaches.

Overview of Case Study 2
The second coach, Cassie, was an independent consultant hired by school systems to help teachers improve literacy instruction. Cassie previously worked as a Reading Recovery teacher leader and as a teacher of fourth- and sixth-grade students.

At the time of the study, Cassie was serving as an “expert provider” for a school in a medium-sized city under the terms of a three-year Reading Excellence grant. The research took place during the final year of the grant. This case study focused on her work in a K–6 elementary school serving a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. She coached in this case study school for one day per month. This study targeted her work with a veteran first-grade teacher and a fourth-grade teacher with five years of experience.

Selection of Coaches as Study Participants
At the time of the study, no definition existed encompassing the range of responsibilities or qualifications required for coaches. Joyce and Showers (1982) offered a foundation for understanding this rapidly evolving role, describing coaching as technical support and feedback provided to teachers by individuals with expertise. Using this notion as a starting point, individuals with expertise in literacy, whose daily work involved providing support to teachers—rather than as providers of direct services to students—were recruited as participants for this study. The original group of four coaches was selected from a pool of eight who had been recommended by colleagues in the Massachusetts Reading Association, directors of school literacy programs, and professors in university literacy education departments. The four were selected with the goal of assembling

Reflection Questions
• What criteria might you use in selecting a literacy coach to serve in your school?
• What kinds of support should principals provide to literacy coaches (e.g., time, freedom from unrelated duties, resources)?
• Why is in-classroom modeling of reading strategies such an important part of a literacy coach’s function?
a panel that was representative of the typical variations in the field. Variations included the amount of time that was scheduled for coaching in each of the schools as well as the coaches’ past experience and training for the role. In addition the coaches selected for this study worked in different large and small cities. Pam and Cassie were among the coaches who were originally selected as participants.

Selection of Teachers and Sites
Each of the original coaches was asked to identify two teachers for participation in the case study. One of the selection criteria was that the coaches identify teachers with whom they had worked for at least five hours in any professional development activity. Another was that the coaches select teachers with whom they were experiencing challenges as well as successes. The coaches understood that the overall purpose of the original study was to learn more about the daily work lives of urban coaches. They also understood that the study was a nonevaluative, nonjudgmental project in which the anonymity of participants would be respected. Because this was clearly explained prior to the start of the research project, the coaches had no motivation other than to select teachers whose responses typified the range of obstacles to and successes in changing classroom practices.

Several of the coaches in the original study divided their time between multiple schools but were asked to select one school that would serve as the research site. The coach needed to have been working at the selected school for a minimum of six months, to ensure that the coach had established relationships with the teachers.

Data Collection
Multiple visits were made to the selected school sites in the original study, for a total of 56 hours of data collection, including eight hours of classroom observation. A typical site visit involved shadowing the coach as she met with teachers, facilitated planning sessions, or worked in classrooms with students and teachers.

Interviews
A total of 17 interviews were conducted for the original study with coaches, teachers, and school principals. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audiotaped and transcribed. (See Table 1 for list of guiding questions.)

Data Sorting
A combined coding procedure (Goetz & Le Compte, 1981) was used to make meaning of the interview transcriptions and additional artifacts. Additional artifacts consisted of field notes describing coaching practices and classroom observations, coaches’ daily schedules, job descriptions for coaches, agendas for demonstration teaching and for inquiry group sessions, and a protocol to guide grade-level teams through collaborative evaluation of student work.

Data sorting began with a set of preliminary categories. One category was established for data describing the practices coaches used to promote staff development. Another related category was established for data describing the systems of belief that served to guide the coaches as they went about their work. Data documenting improvements to classroom instruction, particularly in cases where changes were attributed to the influence of the coach, were also noted. Finally, data documenting changes in school culture were recorded, with a focus on examples of teachers working together to determine how to improve instruction and student performance.

These categories evolved over the course of analysis to match the natural variations found in the data. For example, management and organizational decisions that either supported or hindered the coaches emerged as a new category. As data were sorted across the four original case studies, it became apparent that similar management decisions were present in the cases where coaches and teachers were able to make positive changes. The researcher and a university advisor conducted the data sorting, discussed the accumulated data, and affirmed that it had been placed into the appropriate categories.

Making an Impact
Instruction
In each of the two case studies featured in this article, teachers and principals reported that the coach initiated significant changes in literacy instruction. Both teachers and principals believed that these changes had made a difference for students.
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Table 1
Guiding Interview Questions

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<th>Coaches</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Can you tell me about your work?</td>
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<td>2. How do you manage your responsibilities?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Can you give me some examples of your recent work?</td>
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<td>4. Can you tell me about occasions when you have worked with groups to promote conversations about instruction?</td>
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<td>5. What support do you get for learning how to facilitate change?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Can you tell me what it has been like to work with a coach?</td>
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<td>2. Can you tell me about any change that you have made this year in the way you teach reading or writing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Do you think the coach has been influential in helping you to make these changes?</td>
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<td>4. How would you characterize her way of promoting change?</td>
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<td>5. What, if any, opportunities have you had for conversations or to collaborate with other teachers in ways that you would consider beneficial?</td>
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<td>6. Would these opportunities have occurred without the presence of the literacy coach in the building this year?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. If you are of the opinion that the coach was influential in creating opportunities for you to work and learn with other teachers in the building, how did the coach go about making it happen?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Can you tell me about the experience of having a coach in your school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Do you think that the coach has been influential in helping your staff improve literacy instruction?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Can you give me examples of how the coach changed literacy instruction?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Has the coach been influential in orchestrating opportunities for faculty members to learn from or with one another, to have productive conversations about instruction, or to collaborate in other beneficial ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Would any of these opportunities have occurred without the presence of the coach in the building?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Can you give me any examples or share documents such as minutes from meetings or schedules that would help me to better understand the work of your coach?</td>
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Teachers reported a sense of increased proficiency with a range of instructional, assessment, and management strategies, many of which they were using for the first time. Classroom observations made during site visits and data from principals’ reports corroborated the shift. The most significant changes included

- Increased use of formative assessments, such as running records, reading logs, and samples of student writing to supplement standardized assessments
- Matching of materials to the instructional needs of individual students
- Collection and organization of literacy materials in classroom libraries
- Teacher-led, small-group guided reading and writing sessions
- Conferences with individual students to document progress and provide feedback
- More time allotted for independent reading and writing, with opportunities for students to self-select high-interest books and writing topics
- Direct instruction, in the form of brief minilessons, designed to model skills and strategies specific to needs of students in the class

Teacher testimonies from the case studies provided subjective but compelling evidence that significant changes to instruction occurred in the classroom and positively affected student literacy development.

For the participating fourth-grade veteran teacher in Pam’s case study, writers’ workshop was a new way of teaching, and she was glad to have the support of a coach in implementing the change in her classroom.
assessments such as running records had been influential in changing literacy instruction in the school. She indicated that the city used the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to determine summative performance, but running records provided information about students throughout the year.

School Culture

In both case studies, coaches, teachers, and principals reported significant and observable changes in overall school culture. In general, these changes indicated that collaboration, problem solving, and inquiry had become part of the normative culture, rather than the exception. Specifically,

- Teachers opened their classrooms to coaches.
- Coaches regularly demonstrated classroom instruction, observed classroom instruction, and gave supportive feedback.
- Teacher–coach discussions after demonstration lessons included analysis of student performance and reflections on instructional strategies.
- Common planning times were used effectively to analyze formative assessments, look at student work samples, discuss students’ instructional needs, and reflect on best practices.
- Teachers visited the classrooms of peers to observe classroom arrangements.
- Teachers willingly participated in inquiry groups and professional development facilitated by coaches.
- Agendas for professional development, such as inquiry group topics and specific coaching activities, were guided by the requests of participating teachers.
- Teachers were willing to model instruction for their peers during peer-coaching sessions.
- Teachers felt safe to take risks and to implement and refine new practices.

The report of this teacher was substantiated by the school principal:

If you walk into her classroom...you certainly see how much they are reading, how much they are writing... that the activities they are being asked to do are geared toward improving them in some way. Addressing a particular need, strengthening something that she is finding weak...I see her sitting down and talking with them...and doing running records.

When further questioned about the changes, the principal pointed out that learning to use formative assessments such as running records had been influential in changing literacy instruction in the school. She indicated that the city used the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to determine summative performance, but running records provided information about students throughout the year.

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but the underlying motivation for her work is always clear: “To help children learn to love literacy.”

A particularly interesting aspect of Pam’s coaching was her ability to get teachers more actively involved in conducting demonstrations for their peers. Pam referred to this practice as “peer coaching” and considered it the most important aspect of her work. Helping teachers learn to rely on one another “for extended systems of support” is central, and when she saw “teachers sharing resources and helping each other” to gear instruction to the needs of students, she knew that she had been successful.

Pam structured the interactions among teachers during peer-coaching sessions to promote a climate of mutual respect. The principal at the research site affirmed that Pam’s emphasis on “giving respect to gain it” was part of what made teachers receptive to working with her. Pam knew that a presenting teacher could feel vulnerable if suggestions and critiques were not offered with care and respect. In order for teachers to openly discuss instruction in a meaningful way, they needed to know that they would not be unduly challenged or embarrassed in front of their peers.

Pam explained that cultivating this climate of respect was essential to her becoming a vital part of the life of the school. One of the participating teachers said that “the directives were coming from down-town, but [Pam] eased us along and made people feel comfortable.” The other teacher agreed, “Pam has made people feel comfortable with her and she with us...having that kind of relationship has made it easier for teachers to learn.” The principal added, You may be here to push an agenda, but you can do it in a very respectful way. And I think she is very respectful of how we live in schools. We are not all A-class teachers and our strength could be more in math or science than literacy. And I think she is very thoughtful in her interactions with everybody that she works with. The teachers believe that she is here to help them.

Pam’s “show first, tell later” approach worked well in the case study site, as did her strategy of empowering teachers to gradually take control of their own learning. Pam’s credibility as a coach and as a teacher and her respectful personality had strong appeal. The teachers wanted to work with her, and as evidenced by the observed and reported changes, her coaching made a real impact.
Similar to Pam in her belief that teachers would more willingly embrace change if they saw the resulting benefit to student performance, Cassie believed in demonstrating to teachers “that what she has to share is worthy of their attention.” Gaining their attention may help to overcome “initial resistance,” but the next step is to inspire intrinsic motivation to become invested in the process of change. Both coaches accomplished these goals by demonstrating to teachers what the results of research-based practices can mean in terms of student outcomes.

Cassie provided a powerful incentive by demonstrating the merits of more differentiated practices in literacy. As the participating first-grade teacher recollects,

[I appreciated Cassie’s] enthusiasm and her openness not to force feed but to show us the merits of what can be done. She has done this by taking small groups of our children and preparing lessons and doing it with them [demonstration teaching] so we can sit back and watch her and we can actually see the children and see the way they respond.

The other participating teacher in the school agreed that observing Cassie teach and thinking about the effects of Cassie’s strategies captured the teacher’s attention and motivated her to want to learn more:

I just think it’s her personality and watching her work with the kids. She is just so positive. Like she says, she doesn’t want to know anything about the kids before she comes in. She is just able to take the kids where they are and find a focus with them. The kids love working with her. I love watching her. And being able to talk with her afterwards is definitely very important. To think about how she thinks the students did. Did she meet her focus or did she have to wind up changing her focus? Seeing her actually work with kids...rather than just coming in and saying this is what you should be doing with kids in the classroom...so we actually see her in action.

In addition to believing in teachers and appealing to their pragmatic nature, both Pam and Cassie were very respectful of the teachers with whom they interacted. Perhaps this accounted for teachers’ willingness to step into the more vulnerable position of being observed by other teachers or coaches. Cassie, for example, spoke of having had the “honor and the privilege” of being invited into classrooms to watch teachers at work and to give feedback:

Most often I do the teaching. But these teachers, they felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable enough and open enough to ask me to watch them teach. I made it real clear that I consider that an honor and a privilege. They were in all different places. It was a fascinating day.

Another parallel in the beliefs expressed by Pam and Cassie was that empowering teachers is the ultimate goal of coaching. Pam spoke about the importance of developing collaboration among peers and enabling teachers to rely on one another after the coach is no longer in the school. Cassie made a similar claim about her role: “I am not here to solve everybody’s problem, and it’s not good for me to do that.” Her goal, instead, was to help teachers “define the process by which students become better readers and writers.” This way, teachers can use that knowledge to solve problems about instruction: “I need to turn that over to them.”

In discussing ways to coach teachers to become independent and reflective problem solvers, Cassie talks about the importance of training educators to “notice”:

The term that I come across in my reading is noticing. We have trained teachers in the last 30 or 40 years not to notice but to read the italicized words. They are not noticing, they are just following the textbook. So unless someone challenges that thinking, of course you are going to practice the routine. [Instead, you need to ask:] Is what I am doing working? Is my teaching driven by the textbook, or is it driven by my authentic assessment?

Like Pam, Cassie’s coaching was directed toward promoting a culture of reflective thinking and rigorous discourse among peers about teaching and learning. The practices of each of the coaches were guided by the belief that coaching is about empowerment; that teachers must become reflective practitioners and independent problem solvers to make the decisions required to meet new challenges and sustain positive change over time.

The perception that the ultimate goal of coaching is to serve students was also important to the teachers. The first-grade veteran teacher reflected on her interactions with Cassie in this way:

She is very enthusiastic. You can tell that she loves what she does. She wants us to gain as much from it [as we can] because she wants our children to be able to reach the heights that they can reach.
Leadership, Management, and Organizational Decisions

Three significant management decisions were made to help Pam carry out her work. First, the coach worked primarily with a specific subset of teachers. At Pam’s case study site, the kindergarten through second-grade teachers in the school were in the process of becoming retrained through a comprehensive literacy program at a local university, so the school’s instructional leadership team decided to have Pam coach third- through fifth-grade teachers only.

Second, a 90-minute block was set aside each morning for reading and writing instruction. No special classes were scheduled that required students to leave during this time period, and as a result, all specialist teachers were free to help classroom teachers with literacy instruction. Because there were two teachers in each classroom that shared the responsibilities of teaching literacy, it was possible for one teacher to leave the room and observe weekly demonstrations conducted by the coach in the classroom designated as the “lab site.” As the veteran fifth-grade teacher explained,

Each of us has somebody in the room during the literacy block, so what [Pam] has done to accommodate us is to do two lessons back to back. One at 8:45 until 9:30, and the other from 9:30 until 10:15, so as many people as possible can see the lesson. And she builds the debriefing into the 45 minutes. If we can’t fit it in, we hold the debriefing during our [after-school] professional development session.

Pam facilitated after-school inquiry group sessions with teachers. Teachers willingly participated, because it fulfilled the contractual stipulation that they complete 18 hours of professional development each year.

The third management decision took place at the district level and involved negotiation of teachers’ preparation time to carve out a 90-minute biweekly block for common planning. During this common planning time, the teachers and the coach could look at samples of student work and make decisions about how to help students progress.

The management and organizational decisions in Pam’s school created continuity of staff development activities and a forum for teachers to shape their own professional development agendas. For example, the instructional strategies that were featured during the lab site each week were aligned with the staff development curriculum of the after-school inquiry group. As the principal stated,

Choosing to have the coach conduct the 18 hours of inquiry group time has created continuity and carry-over for the teachers because, besides discussing the chapters they are reading in the study text, they can also talk about the coach’s demonstrations and their reactions to what they have observed at the lab sites.

The teachers seemed to be in agreement that the management and organizational structure provided a cohesive learning environment: “I can speak for most of us,” one teacher said. “We are happy with the way it is going. Our professional development has been an intact unit.”

At Cassie’s school, two management decisions stood out as most significant. First, the principal chose to provide staff development in literacy instruction during the contractual workday. Teachers were released by grade level from classroom responsibilities, and substitute coverage was provided so that teachers could participate in inquiry groups or lab-site demonstrations followed by debriefing sessions.

The second management decision by Cassie’s principal was to use the internal literacy staff to create continuity between Cassie’s visits. This was an important consideration in light of the fact that Cassie’s time in the school was limited. For example, the primary-level reading resource specialist completed her own training with Cassie and was able to support teachers as they were learning to implement many of the new instructional strategies. The principal also used the literacy coordinator to solicit teacher feedback in setting the agenda for Cassie’s monthly visits. The participating first-grade teacher reported that

[The literacy coordinator] goes around and asks what would you like to see. So if there is an area that we would like a little bit of expertise in, or if we would just like to watch her to see if we’re doing it correctly, then that’s what she targets.

This way, Cassie’s teachers could request support in an area that they felt would be most beneficial for
them and for their students, and they were able to shape the course of their own professional development. The regularly scheduled opportunities for coach–teacher collaboration, teacher input in formulating the coach’s agendas, and internal staff members who maintained continuity between coach’s visits were important factors contributing to Cassie’s success. It may well be that the amount of time spent in the schools was less significant than the structures put into place to ensure that coaches and teachers are able to use the time beneficially.

Conclusions: What Does It Take to Make an Impact?

Effective coaching is not a top-down process. Both coaches in these case studies believed strongly in a grassroots, bottom-up approach to helping teachers develop intrinsic motivation. Both believed that the ultimate goal of a coach was to empower teachers with the reflective, problem-solving skills required to accomplish the difficult goals of initiating and sustaining meaningful change. The coaches believed that they should fade back as teachers became more adept at matching instruction and instructional materials to the diverse needs of their students.

Teachers who endeavored to change their literacy instruction did so because their coaches helped them to see evidence that a new practice was worthwhile. Pam’s “proof lies in the pudding” approach goes well with Guskey’s (1986) notion that changes in teachers’ beliefs come about after—rather than before—changes in practice. As teachers gained mastery over new instructional strategies and saw positive outcomes, they became increasingly willing to discuss the conceptual foundations for the practices that were working so well.

The successful coaches had the benefit of working in schools that valued teacher learning and provided the time, space, and other resources to facilitate discourse, inquiry, and reflection.

Fulfilling the promise of coaching in urban schools depends on the successful integration of these three essential elements:

1. **School culture** that reinforces adult learning, risk-taking, and professional development and that allows school leaders to support the notion that the learning of adults is as valued as the learning of children

2. **Organizational and management decisions** that build time for adult learning into the workday, that use lead teachers or peer-coaching arrangements to disseminate important teacher knowledge and skills, and that break the cycle of teacher isolation by creating the time and space for ongoing peer support and for collaborative inquiry and problem solving

3. **Coaching practices** that capture the interest and commitment of teachers, demonstrate the power of effective instruction on student performance, model the skills needed by teachers to target instruction to varying needs of student learners, and empower teachers to become independent problem solvers

References


The editors of *The Reading Teacher*, Robert B. Cooter, Jr., and J. Helen Perkins, are welcoming manuscripts for a themed issue on the topic “Reading in Grades 4–6: Focus on Expository Reading.” The deadline for submissions is February 1, 2010. The issue will be published in the fall of 2010.

Manuscripts must provide an appropriate blend of practical classroom application and solid theoretical framework and must appeal to *RT*’s broad audience of classroom teachers, university researchers, literacy consultants, coaches, and policymakers. All manuscripts will be subject to peer review, with no guarantee of acceptance.

For further information, contact the editors at rcooter@bellarmine.edu or jhperkins@memphis.edu. For specific submission guidelines, go to the publications section at www.reading.org. When submitting your manuscript through our online tracking system at mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rt, please indicate in your cover letter that your manuscript should be considered for the themed issue on expository reading.

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