Coaching Ourselves to Perform Multiplicity and Advocacy: A Response to Stephens and Mills

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Cahnmann-Taylor draws on Boalian Theatre of the Oppressed to offer a practice for literacy teachers and coaches that can open up multiple perspectives and multiple levels of intentions and motivations for a teacher’s decision making. She challenges coaches and teachers to engage in artistic examinations of multiplicity to move toward performing complexity and advocacy.

I applaud Diane Stephens and Heidi Mills (2014/this issue) for sharing the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI) practices that focused on people, not programs, and engaged coaches in a culture of inquiry at all levels. The authors support claims of success with clear data indicating lowered numbers of individualized education plans and higher state test scores.

The data and narratives of practice are convincing. Yet I struggled with some claims that, at times, appeared contradictory. On the one hand, the authors argue for a culture of inquiry in which coaches at all levels model critically reflective teaching stances. On the other hand, it appears that the six teaching team members at the top (though graphically represented at the bottom) are those who unilaterally selected the theoretical and applied readings, selected and demonstrated strategies (e.g., read-alouds, Reading the Room), and “did [their] best, in [their] own way, to help coaches grow as teachers of coaches and of readers and writers” (Stephens & Mills, 2014/this issue).

This commentary is in response to “Coaching as Inquiry: The South Carolina Reading Initiative” by Diane Stephens and Heidi Mills, in the special issue “Coaching for Change: Generating Dialogue About Power, Literacy, and Learning” of Reading & Writing Quarterly, Volume 30, Number 3 (2014), pages 190–206.

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My question to the authors is this: How did the teaching team members also model their own growth? How did team leaders and coaches at all levels model their own engagement with uncertainty and ambiguity? How do team members and coaches alike process the in-flight decisions educators and coaches make and unpack their ideological foundations? How do we engage in the collective voicing of our belief systems, especially when those belief systems are fluid and contextually contingent?

I return to the example of Heidi’s activity, Reading the Room, to illustrate my questions and offer one possible addition for an inquiry state of mind. I admire Reading the Room, as it invites careful attention to features of classroom life that too often go unnoticed—full classroom libraries versus shelves predominantly filled with basal readers may give coaches some insight into a teacher’s orientation toward literacy and literature. The authors suggest that coaches were “careful not to make judgments” (Stephens & Mills, 2014/this issue), and yet presumably coaches were cultivating a belief system that favored authentic literature over an exclusive focus on basal readers: teacher- and student-constructed word walls over commercial products. This exercise leads me to wonder: How might coaches also consider the multiple motivations a teacher may have for creating classroom environments that appear one way or another to the visiting coach-observer? How might we coach ourselves and others to notice teacher choices through rainbow-colored lenses? How might teaching team members as well as coaches model critically reflexive and recursive processes?

Rainbow of Desire, a theater technique developed by the late Augusto Boal (1995), offers an approach that could create multiple readings of a room, exploring a kaleidoscope of influences, motivations, feelings, and belief systems. Inspired by Freire’s (1970/2000) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Boal developed Theatre of the Oppressed, techniques to facilitate a “rehearsal for revolution” (Boal, 1974/1979, p. 155) during a time of extreme repression and military dictatorship in Brazil. Like Freire’s work, Boal’s theater strategies have continued to inspire audiences worldwide to “act up” (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010) in their own lives, exploring the depth and complexity of working against oppression in the spirit of social justice and democracy.

Rainbow of Desire is one of the components of Theatre of the Oppressed that was developed when Boal moved from working in developing countries to working in Europe and the United States. Unlike the overt military and political dictatorships in developing countries, in more economically advantaged countries such as the United States and France, oppression was more often psychological or covert. Boal’s techniques help groups of participants, who he termed “spect-actors,” to give voice to these internal oppressions or “cops in the head”; unleash them; and move toward more democratic, participatory actions.

Take for example the reading of a classroom with numerous basal readers and very few examples of children’s literature, commercially purchased posters, and word walls and very little student- or teacher-generated work.
Coaching via a rainbow technique might ask spect-acting coaches one by one to come to the center of the instructional space and perform the range of character hues that might inform a classroom teacher’s ambient decisions. Here I imagine but a few of these possible voices; certainly coaches working day to day with numerous teachers could complicate this list and add many more colors to the rainbow I present in Figure 1.

Beyond imagining the endless influences that motivate an instructor’s classroom decisions, one also must imagine the indeterminate variety of interactional possibilities between a coach and a teacher. Coaches too have multiple hues, and exchanges between coaches and teachers are always fluid. Thus, an inquiry stance informed by Rainbow of Desire and other Boalian theatrical techniques allows one to see the partiality of any one subject position and how contingent our words and actions are upon the coconstructed performance of social conflict (Cahnnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010). I believe Rainbow of Desire and other techniques of artful instructional and analytic engagement have the potential to support the authors’ stated intentions for the SCRI project “not to teach others what to do but for all of us to help one another grow as teachers by broadening and deepening our knowledge base” (Stephens & Mills, 2014/this issue).

Another helpful addition to the SCRI project from what Boal termed his “arsenal” of theater techniques might be Legislative Theatre (Boal, 1998), an approach specifically aimed at promoting transformation at the policy level. The SCRI authors mentioned that as grant funding ran out, South Carolina

| “I like having a guide to tell me what to do; I feel uncertain making my own choices.” |
| “There are so many reading levels in this classroom—choosing commercial materials assures me I’m treating readers fairly and on grade level.” |
| “My principal (or colleagues) insist on using a consistent reading program—I believe we’re all supposed to use the same materials I have here.” |
| “I have three kids at home and very little time for additional planning outside the workday; using these materials helps me to more easily prepare.” |
| “My teacher education program was based on using these readers. They gave us catalogues to purchase commercial products to decorate our rooms.” |
| “I didn’t know we had permission to use authentic children’s literature.” |
| “I don’t want to waste the district’s money and not use the supplies they purchased for my classroom.” |

FIGURE 1 Why does a classroom teacher use commercial and basal products? A rainbow to count the ways.
policymakers shifted the focus from literacy coaches to generic coaches, those who would serve all content (implicitly diluting the success of the literacy-only focus of SCRI). In a strained fiscal climate, perhaps this makes sense. Teachers need help in all curricular areas, so why not provide coaching that cuts across disciplinary boundaries? Perhaps, too, this demonstrates a political climate that is out of touch with applied knowledge of South Carolina teachers and coaches.

Boal used Legislative Theatre to bring these types of ground-level conversations to policymakers’ attention so that policies and resources might more accurately respond to people’s needs. Legislative Theatre challenges the idea that the teacher or literacy coach is “a mere spectator to the actions of the parliamentarian” (Boal, 1998, p. 16); rather, these methods galvanize citizens to break silences and, through theater, command policymakers’ responses. I believe all educators and teacher educators require more strategies for communicating with policymakers to make sure the purse strings remain open for programs like SCRI that work.

Beginning in 2003, we began the Teachers Act Up! (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010) project based on Boalian principles that theater could be used to cultivate agentive voices needed for immigrant advocacy. Aimed at recruiting and supporting multilingual teachers to serve increasing populations of English language learners in the Southeast, we adopted some of the Boalian theater activities mentioned as a means of rehearsing difficult conversations with colleagues, students, administrators, parents, and even politicians. In order to maintain and develop strong advocacy programs such as SCRI that improve student achievement and enhance teachers’ sense of efficacy, we might learn to coach ourselves in ways to perform complexity, multiplicity, and advocacy both within the classroom as well as in district, county, state, and national offices that legislate education.

REFERENCES


