

## **The Projects: Education Under Construction with UCLA's Literacy and Leadership Partners**

**By Erin Powers**

**Summary:** A literacy coach compares working in public schools to building homes for learning, with the teacher as the builder, the coach as entrenched in the building's frame.

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When I was a teacher, I thought of myself as a builder: every year I had nine months to build a home for the reading, writing, and thinking lives of my students. So I learned the skills of an architect and carefully drew plans for our curriculum. Then I learned how to be a contractor and I operated the machines that scraped the land for the foundation. I also became an electrician, a carpenter, a plumber, and a landscaper. Sparks of ideas flowed through our house; beautiful built-in furniture held our ever-growing library; we flushed away doubts about whether we could succeed; we walked through lush gardens and smelled the flowers. Students thrived in clean bright rooms. I built a home for learning.

But not every year in my classroom stands out as a picture from *Architectural Digest*. There were times when I taught a scripted curriculum and my house looked like a pre-fab number, complete with plastic flowers in the pots. The home protected students during friendly weather, but I worried about what might happen during a storm. Then there were times when I catered to a group of overbearing parents and completely went against what I knew to be good teaching. Those houses would look out of place—all glass and steel beams in a neighborhood of quaint cottages—and I would try to rationalize their ostentatious look. I'm not proud of these times, but it's part of my learning experience and I need to remember *all* of the homes I built, not just the best ones.

Now I'm a literacy and leadership partner (LLP) and I no longer see myself as a builder. Much of a builder's work is public: people can drive by to see its progress, or stop in to inspect during an open house. And anyone can log on to the internet for a satellite view. It's different for literacy coaches.

Part of the goal of an LLP is to become so ingrained in the frame of a school that we go unnoticed. As part of the frame, we begin at the floor, hold up the walls, provide space for wiring and insulation, and stay strong for all. We understand that what we do is not about us; it's about the teachers, the administrators, the community, and of course the students—the builders, the floor, the foundation, and the inhabitants.

We're not just consultants, offering our ideas and then moving on. We understand the complexity of human relationships and the value of trust in the workplace. We know that stability and time are needed to help foster growth. Embedded in the frame, we will not go anywhere; we are constant and fixed. We know that schools' needs are sophisticated and in order to be successful, our work has to match that level of sophistication. We're in this to build the capacity of every professional that we meet, and ultimately we allow schools to grow stronger and be more effective. Without a solid frame, the homes will collapse under their own weight, no matter how smooth the seams of the drywall.

How do we frame homes for education? We don't do it the same way in every school. Every neighborhood has a different style and every campus has different needs, a different culture, and a different history. These differences must be valued and respected, but there are tools that we all value: Cognitive Coaching<sup>sm</sup>, consulting, and collaboration. Through these avenues, we model professionalism, best practices, and reflection.

Helping our education builders to recognize their skills and allowing them to refine their techniques is one of our biggest goals. One of the challenges built into our education system is the difficulty finding time to invest in reflecting on what we've done, where we're going, what works, and why. Teachers and administrators' days are packed with planning and doing, planning and doing, planning and doing. In secondary schools, each teacher generally teaches five separate classes and has one class period to plan her lessons, contact parents, and assess student work. That's not much time for more than 150 students and their families. The responsibilities of our principal and assistant principals are overwhelming. So, while reflection is encouraged in the credentialing process, it's difficult for teachers to continue the habit of daily reflection while on the

job, isolated in their classrooms. And literacy and leadership partners step in to help educators use the skills that they already own to see where to build next.

Those who build their own homes appreciate their work and have a better understanding of it than someone who has it done for them. Coaches break up the mind-numbing cycle of planning and doing in isolation by engaging builders in conversation about their work. When teachers tell me what they're doing in their classrooms, I ask careful questions about their instruction, hoping to help them view their work in different ways. I want them to be cognizant of why something they're doing is working for students or why it's not. But I don't tell them why I think it works or doesn't work; it's not my home to build. Instead, I encourage them to come to their own conclusions.

I ask question after question and offer personalized data when appropriate. "I noticed that Jose answered four of the six questions that you posed to the class," or "after you passed back the papers, half of the students put them away and half of them looked at your comments." Then I give them space to think about their actions and the results.

The builder knows every single piece of the structure and understands why the materials work to provide shelter, warmth, and comfort. She's cognizant of how her choices shaped the home. If I gave teachers my opinion, they could become like home buyers, who simply see what they like or don't like and invest their money, without the level of understanding the builder has. One by one, I help our builders see the power and potential in the daily choices they make for students and our school.

Like skilled builders, many teachers are natural collaborators, eager to develop new curriculum with others, in equal partnership with someone to share the work and the experience. But the isolation of a traditional school day makes collaboration difficult, and teachers do not have opportunities to regularly plan lessons with others. Additionally, some teachers lose or never achieve the skills of true collaboration. They offer a handout to someone who didn't ask for it and call it collaboration. Some teachers are turned off to collaboration when other teachers fail to presume positive intentions or to share equally in the building process.

This is what sets collaboration with LLPs apart. We're skilled in the "Seven Norms of Collaboration": pausing before we speak, paraphrasing what the other says, putting ideas on the table, presuming positive intentions, probing for specificity, paying attention to self and others, and pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry (Garmston 1999). We can make the collaborative process the stimulating experience that it's meant to be. Two builders are better than one, and students end up with better, more coherent instruction as a result. As a team, the LLP and the teacher become an episode of *Extreme Home Makeover*, without the extreme demolition.

Consulting remains a part of my daily work; teachers and administrators need information, strategies, and materials. I organize the assessment and professional development calendars for the English / language arts teachers and support their implementation. I keep the teachers informed on new curricular developments from the district, the local district, and the state.

When a teacher wants a handout on a particular topic, I find one or make one. When she wants to see what a strategy looks like in her classroom, I model the strategy within a lesson for her students. When a teacher needs district-made materials, I make arrangements to pick up those materials for her at the district office. I do the same for administrators and teachers in their professional development programs. I'm the go-to gal for anything instructional, the gofer at the construction site, gathering materials and tools for the skilled carpenters and electricians.

While I work in each capacity—coaching, collaborating, and consulting—I build my relationships with each individual. The teachers at my Program Improvement 5+ school have learned to be skeptical of one another, of their administrators, and of anything that the district promotes. They've seen the pattern: a program is introduced with much fanfare, like the latest fad in interior design; they watch it last for a year, and then never hear about it again. Their disbelief in new programs is understandable because of their past experience with cycles in education. The same could be said for their leadership, as principals come and go more quickly than the students. Teachers are skittish and with

good reason. They never know what the next big idea is—the next style in architecture—that they’re going to have to adapt their practice to satisfy. There’s little trust on our campuses. But a building site is not safe unless everyone trusts the others to do their job and do it well.

Part of my job is supporting a system to foster that much-needed trust. I’m there to help focus the staff on an instructional plan that is consistent and supports learning for all. I’m an ally in learning. If I can support the frame on which instruction is built, teachers and students will have a much better chance of succeeding. No more grass huts for us. No more dirt floors. We want a twenty-first-century home in education.

How do we know that what we’re doing is working? At this early stage in my work, I use small, individual measurements. I know I’m effective when an administrator says to me, “I try to be like you” to describe how she wants to handle conflict. I know I’m effective when at the conclusion of a planning session, a teacher says, “I can’t wait to teach this!” or runs up to me a week later with a pile of student work and says, “You won’t believe what they came up with!” I know I’m effective when a teacher looks at me and says, “I trust you.” My goal is for rising test scores, anthologies of student writing, and observable literacy practices in all subject areas to reflect our builders’ growth. Meanwhile, I hold up what I know to be valuable for schools: communication, reflection, best practices; and I watch the community be built around me—until I’m invisible and forgotten.

## **Reference**

Garmston, Robert J., and Bruce Wellman. 1999. *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*.. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.