How Effective is Writer-Coach Connection?

Every year, the WCC parent organization Community Alliance for Learning conducts a rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of WriterCoach Connection. The evaluation utilizes professionally designed survey instruments to measure responses by students, teachers, and coaches, and also incorporates school-district writing achievement data, when available.

So how are we doing? Every year this assessment generates extraordinarily high ratings for the program, and 2008-09 was no exception. Overall, students rated WCC at 3.1 on a four-point scale, well within the "Helpful" category on the surveys. Students felt the most helpful aspects of coaching were "helping me understand the next steps I need to take to improve my writing," "showing me what's working in my writing," "giving me suggestions for organizing my ideas," and "showing me how to express my ideas more clearly."

Ratings from the front of the classroom were even higher. All teachers surveyed said their writer coaches were helpful with improving the quality of student writing, giving the program a mean overall score of 3.38 on a four-point scale and assigning the highest scores to working with site coordinators and communicating with site coordinators about the goals of the lesson and areas for coaching. These responses indicate the high degree to which WriterCoach Connection is embedded within the curriculum of the schools, and is recognized by teachers as supporting their existing learning goals.

Meantime, writing achievement data from the Berkeley Unified School District for the middle schools reflected a 20% increase in writing proficiency between fall and spring among students served by WriterCoach Connection in 2008-09. We would never claim that such dramatic improvement is the result of only WCC; in a landscape as complex as academic achievement, progress results from many factors, most especially skilled, dedicated teachers and solid curriculum, as noted by independent assessment analyst Dr. P.J. Hallam. But regarding the influence of WCC, Dr. Hallam adds, "The trend is strong, indeed. With the strong results of the program's survey assessments, and the results of the comparison study from 2008, there is evidence that WCC is a contributing factor."

Volunteers pair up to practice coaching strategies on each other during a WCC training.

The full WCC assessment report for 2008-09 is available at **www.writercoachconnection.org/results.html.**

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WRITERCOACH CONNECTION

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The Left Column View

So much to talk about, so little space! The determination of the school communities in Berkeley to find funding for WCC in 2009-10, despite strangulated budgets. The continued dedication of coaches in Albany, who will flock to classrooms this year to work with students in even the scaled-back programs we envision for Albany High and Albany Middle School in the devastated budget landscape. The magnetic attraction of working with the students and staff at Media Academy in Oakland, where WCC hopes to expand this year to the twelfth grade (fingers crossed on the budget). More potential expansion in Oakland, where we hope to launch a pilot program in the spring. The remarkable flood of donations unleashed by this past spring's Read-and-Write-a-thon.

But for me it's a time to think back to ten years ago when Dr. Mary Lee Cole and a small band of cohorts launched their dream, writer coaching for public school students, with a handful of coaches for a half dozen classes. Now it's 400 coaches and 1,700 students in three districts. I encourage you to read the ruminations about our journey from our tireless board chair Kathy Kahn, next door to this column. Kathy has steered us through the most challenging budget year in our history and has guided us into open waters, pointing toward new territory to populate with writer coaches. (Imperial literacy!) Can't wait to see what we'll be writing about in ten more years.

Bob

Robert Menzimer
Executive Director
Community Alliance for Learning

Looking Back Ten Years... or Fewer

by Kathleen Kahn, Board Chair, Community Alliance for Learning

As WriterCoach Connection heads into its tenth (tenth!) year, we old-timers are looking back, with happy hearts and swelled heads, to 2000-2001, when our 35 pioneer coaches first sat down with 180 Berkeley High students and said, "Now, what would you like to work on?" We're telling old-timer tales, of how we expanded to the Berkeley middle schools, and then to Albany High … and then to Albany Middle … and finally, last year, to Oakland. We're marveling at the success our students have had. We're cherishing not only the measurable success that shows up in those bar graphs in the assessment reports, but also the success we can't measure, the kind we see in a student's new-found enthusiasm, or a teacher's thanks. We're singing praises to our 400-plus volunteer coaches, who make it all happen.

Or so goes the conventional milestone-anniversary piece. I'd like to change the convention just a little, and look back only one year. The Year the Economy Crashed didn't spare WCC. We found ourselves, mid-year, suddenly scrambling to keep our program intact within a frighteningly reduced budget. We found ourselves fundraising in ways entirely new to us, as funders and schools cut back the contributions we always relied on. We worried (well, I worried) about how much longer we could keep going.

And then our people came through. You multi-talented coaches, you creative staff, you dedicated teachers and students … so many of you stepped up, in so many new ways. You volunteered your time, talents, checkbooks, email lists, and more. You kept the program going through a worrisome year, and you made it possible to believe in a future.

Over the past decade, you've built something worth keeping, and you have shown you know how to keep it. Praises to you all.

The Value of Writer Coaching

by Robert Menzimer, Executive Director, Community Alliance for Learning

When you approach your very first coaching session as a WCC volunteer, your head is invariably abuzz with questions, despite six hours of focused training: *What will this really be like? What will my students and I actually say to each other? What will I write on the coach worksheets?* It's only after you've been coaching for awhile that you realize what the deeper questions are: *What value does this coaching bring to a student? To a teacher? To a school?* And you realize that the answers are right in front of you: in the school hallways thronged with your fellow community volunteer coaches, in the words of your teachers as they introduce you and your team to their students, and most especially in your students' eyes as they see their writing blossoming in front of them with your guidance.

There are people who say all this much better than I can. For example, about those school corridors teeming with coaches, Principal Benjamin Schmookler at Media Academy in Oakland walked out of his office one day, saw all the WCC coaches, and said simply, *"This is the most volunteers I've ever seen."* Mr. Schmookler also provided one of my all-time favorite WCC quotes the day he said to me, *"My mom is going to coach."* And so she did. (And still does.)

At Berkeley High's Community Partnerships Academy, teacher Susannah Bell says, *"The WriterCoach Connection is a phenomenal resource for our small school, an invaluable tool for our most important goal — ensuring that our students are prepared for college writing."*

At King Middle School in Berkeley, teacher Alma Owens notes,*"I love having the coaches. It would be very difficult to give each student such personal attention without them."*

Across town in Berkeley at Willard Middle School, teacher Patty Bonsall declares, *"I get more work, a higher quality work, because the coaches help the students focus on their thinking."*

Same story over in Albany, where, asked what she liked about having the writer coaches in her classroom, middle school teacher Kathy Mitani replied with another question: *"Can they come more?!"*

And one of my all-time favorite teacher observations comes from Mary Patterson, at Longfellow Middle School in Berkeley: *"Let me tell you what WCC is like for me. It's like a miracle!"*

You can hear words like this yourself. Just sign up to be a writer coach, at **www.writercoachconnection.org** or 510.524.2319.

Coachin' in Motion in Oakland

Things are popping in Oaktown. WriterCoach Connection's pilot program at Media Academy, in the Fruitvale District in 2008-09, was a success by any measure. Writer coaches worked with all tenth-grade students throughout the school year, and fully 98% of the students reported that the coaching was helpful for them.

Teacher Sonja Totten-Harris noted in particular the helpfulness of WCC site co-coordinators Lisa Awrey and Clara Sneed, who *"...were great thinking partners about the assignments — what was working, what wasn't. They provided a useful outside perspective."*

WCC Program Manager Teresa Barnett, who supervised program assessment for 2008-09, noted, *"The results [at Media] are just amazing — students made great strides, with a substantial number moving into the 'proficient' category. And, [on a scale of 0-30] the overall average score rose from about 15 in the fall to about 20 in the spring!"*

From the mentor side of the table, Media coach Dale Rogers Marshall pronounces WCC, *"Very valuable experience and an excellent program."* Words of note, coming from a coach who is also a former college president! Given the success so far, WCC returns to Media this fall with plans for further Oakland expansion.

WCC volunteers frequently coach English Language Learner, (ELL) students, in regular classes or special ELL classes. This piece, written by 14-year old Tenzin Dechen in Ms. Felarca's 8th grade English ELL class at King Middle School, surprised and amused us. It is one of many wonderful student works we could have chosen to feature here.

Dechen's grandparents left Tibet in the 1960's because of the Chinese occupation and moved to southern India where her family lived as part of the exiled Tibetan community near Mysore, and where Dechen was born. Her father came to the U.S. in 2003 and two years later, Dechen, her mother, and nine brothers and sisters joined him. With encouragement from her WCC writing coach who kept asking for more details, this colorful story emerged, complete with 'lesson learned.'

"WCC coaches have played a valuable role in helping my ELL students with their writing skills. Thanks in part to the writing coaches, my students are passing the California exit exam at higher rates and with higher scores than in the past."

Nancy Mongan,
Albany High ELL teacher

October 20, 2009 is the National Day of Writing.

In celebration, Writing Galleries are springing up across the nation. Encourage interested students to submit their work to the WCC Writing Gallery at http://galleryofwriting.org/galleries/105752
Send work to:
robert@writercoachconnection.org

Student Writing in the Spotlight:

Think Before You Leap

by Tenzin Dechen

Tenzin Dechen in Ms. Felarca's 8th grade English ELL class at King Middle School

It happened during the summer of 2004 in India...

I talked to my cousin Wangdue and said "I am really happy to be at your house." His house was big and had a beautiful gigantic garden. It had lots of yummy fruit trees — such as mango, guava, coconut, papaya and bamboo shoot. Being at his house was like being in paradise.

Wangdue, who was eleven, looked like a boy version of me and was the same height even though he was two years older than me. That afternoon, we took a long walk on the dirt path under trees to the end of the garden. Everything was green and fruits were hanging on the trees. I climbed up a mango tree to pick mangoes. We stopped at a pool that looked like it had mud in it. I dared my cousin to jump in the mud pool. But he said "The person who dares goes first." I thought "Why not, it's just mud. It won't hurt me."

I jumped in. I felt my body get heavy. I could feel myself sinking. I smelled this awful smell. I was sinking in this greenish, smelly, heavy muck, which I instantly realized was cow manure. I sunk up to my chest. I shouted, "Help! Pull me out." Wangdue was laughing and he said, "Stop playing, Dechen." I said, "No, I am not playing. Go get Aunt Yangzom." I was holding on to grass at the edge of the mud pool to keep from sinking further but my hands were slipping. Wangdue started running back to the house, shouting for his mom. The minutes ticked by and my hands were slipping more every second. Soon I saw Aunt Yangzom running toward me. She reached my hand and said, "Oh my God! Give me your hand." She pulled and pulled until I got out of the cow manure.

Afterward, I was so angry at my cousin for daring me to jump in the mud pool. I thought to myself, "Am I the dumbest girl in history?" When I look back at the time, five years ago, I realize how silly and goofy I was. I laugh at myself but I also realize I could have died. Now I know I must think a million times before I leap.