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Writing Coaches of Montana: Providing In-class Support to Middle and High School Writers

The authors describe the Writing Coaches of Montana model and share the benefits of writing coaching for students and teachers.

Teachers of writing know the importance of giving students feedback throughout the writing process. Teachers of writing also know the value of having students write for authentic audiences. However, classroom teachers often face challenges in these two areas. Many teachers do not have sufficient time to meet with each student to provide feedback on multiple drafts of a writing assignment. Some teachers do not have easy access to authentic audiences for their students' writing.

Writing Coaches of Montana (WCM; formerly Writing Coaches of Missoula) is a non-profit, independent, community-based organization that addresses these challenges. WCM's mission is to help Montana students write competently, think critically and express themselves confidently. WCM supports teachers by recruiting, training and supervising community volunteers who work individually with students in middle and high school classrooms on writing assignments that require critical thinking and revision. The success of WCM's approach reflects 22 years of best practices and innovation as well as ongoing collaboration with the University of Montana (UM) Writing Center, the UM English Teaching Program, the UM School of Education, the Missoula County Public School District, and other public schools across western Montana.

As two current board members of WCM, we present the benefits of this approach and discuss: 1) how writing coaches support teachers and

students on curriculum-based writing assignments; 2) how community volunteers are trained and supervised as writing coaches; and 3) what teachers, students, and coaches say about the value of writing coaches.

The Writing Coach Model: In-class Support for Curriculum-based Assignments

WCM respects the classroom teacher's learning environment and supports his/her goals and expectations of the writing assignment. We focus on the writing process, with an emphasis on revision and critical thinking. As writing coaches work with students, we strive to develop student's written competence and confidence.

WCM uses a model that relies on a minimum of two sequential meetings between writing coaches and students. Each writing coach meets with the same student over two sessions. At the invitation of the classroom teacher, WCM schedules and enlists trained writing coaches to work with every student in the class on a curriculum-based writing assignment. These assignments are usually persuasive or expository essays. In advance of the first coaching session, the teacher and the WCM program director discuss the specific assignment and other relevant information (rubrics, planning guides, etc.). The WCM program director shares this information with the coaches who will be working in that classroom. When the coaches arrive at the beginning of a class period,

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the program director assigns coaches to partner with specific students. Coaches meet individually with every student in a class for 20-30 minute sessions. These partnerships continue through the second coaching session.

Students arrive at the first meeting with a first draft, an outline, or (at minimum) pre-writing of their assignment. In a typical conference, after the coach and student spend a few minutes getting to know each other, the coach asks the student to verbally summarize the thesis and main points, and then to read his/her paper aloud. The coach begins with positive feedback, and, through a question-driven process, explores ideas with the student on how to make improvements to accomplish the writing expectations of the assignment. During the first coaching session, the discussion often centers on ideas (thesis, details, evidence) and organization, with the student making his/her own notes on the draft. The coach does not write on the student's paper and does not edit for grammar, usage, or mechanics. Towards the end of this session, the coach fills out a "Work Agreement Form" summarizing what was discussed and what changes should be made. The student takes this form to guide the revision of his/her draft. When the student meets with the same coach in the second session, they will use this form to discuss the revised draft.

About one week later, the writing coach meets with the same student to discuss the revisions. After the student reads aloud the revised draft, the coach again begins with positive feedback and an initial focus on content and organization of the student's writing. If the paper's ideas and organization are sound, the coach and student discuss style (word choice and sentence fluency) and conventions (grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation). He/she may refer to the assessment rubric for the writing assignment and discuss the improvement in writing through these two coaching sessions. Throughout these

conversations, the coach encourages the student to reflect on the importance of writing as a thinking and learning process that takes time and feedback.

Because WCM serves at the convenience and invitation of the classroom teacher, our coaching sessions are a natural part of the class and curriculum. While WCM coaches work primarily in English Language Arts classes, writing coaches can also help students on writing assignments in History/Social Studies, Biology, Geography, Mathematics, and Business. When content area teachers invite WCM to work with their students, we are addressing the Montana Common Core Standards for integrating literacy across the curriculum. Regardless of the discipline, close collaboration with teachers enables WCM to support and enhance writing instruction by providing individualized feedback and an authentic audience for students and their writing.



Training and Supervision of Volunteer Coaches

WCM recruits coaches from all walks of life. Our volunteers range from pre-service teachers to retired educators, bankers to bakers, homemakers to professional writers. All coaches share the belief that good writing is an essential life skill; we also share the commitment and ability to engage positively and productively with students in the classroom.

Twice yearly (early in the fall and spring semesters), University of Montana writing instructors conduct a 3-hour training workshop, required for new volunteers and optional for

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experienced coaches. In our workshop, we explain and demonstrate the student-centered coaching model that encourages students to discover their own solutions to writing problems. This training introduces new coaches to the mission and foundational principles of WCM. In the workshop, the new coaches learn how to focus on ideas and organization and practice how to give feedback on drafts. Veteran coaches share what to expect and how to respond when students come to sessions with their first draft—or with no draft at all. New coaches are trained to challenge more proficient writers to reach for higher standards and to encourage struggling students to confidently begin expressing their ideas in writing. After the 3-hour workshop and prior to their first independent coaching session with students, the new coaches shadow experienced coaches for 2-4 individual coaching sessions, and observe the diverse ways in which coaches support student writers.

Whenever writing coaches work in the classroom with students, a WCM program coordinator is on site for the duration of the class. Not only does the coordinator address any questions or concerns coaches may have, he/she also actively manages the logistical challenges involved in pairing coaches to multiple students, ensuring that coaches manage their time efficiently, and that all students are where they need to be. The classroom teacher is therefore able to attend to any additional student needs, or observe these coaching sessions, which give insight into how his/her students are improving their writing, thinking, and learning.

The Value of Writing Coaches: Qualitative and Quantitative Evidence

The benefits of having WCM in the classroom are both immediate and long-lasting. The biggest benefits of coaching sessions are realized when teachers repeatedly invite coaches into their classrooms (both over the course of a school-year, and for multiple consecutive years). Students become accustomed to conversing about their thinking and writing, teachers see improvements

to the quality of student writing, and volunteers are seamlessly integrated into the in-class experience.

By being an authentic audience for students, writing coaches bring fresh perspectives and valuable life experience into the classroom. One high school English teacher wrote: “The best part, by far, is providing the students with an opportunity to sit with a community member who is excited about writing, helping and inviting the kids to take the time that they often don't have (or make) to read the essay aloud and defend their choices.”

In turn, students respond favorably to the individualized feedback. A high school student wrote to her coach: “Thanks to you my writing has become stronger and more meaningful. You encouraged me to bring out my own voice, which I believe transformed it into a beautiful piece of writing.” From this focused attention on individual student writing come powerful writing moments that make lasting impressions.

Significantly, coaching programs also address broader inequities inherent in our education system. In-classroom coaching sessions eliminate the stigma associated with seeking additional outside help, and level the playing field for students without external support for their academic assignments. For students who face socio-economic hardships, this individualized support may be especially important. One eighth grade teacher who has used writing coaches in her classroom for 4 years writes: “... many of our students have labeled themselves ... ‘wrong-side-of-the-tracks kids’... They have to work a little harder than some to break down those barriers and Writing Coaches assist in their journey...”

The benefits of this approach extend beyond building writing confidence to supporting both institutional and individual connections that enable communities to implement positive educational change. Encouraging community engagement in education connects the talents of our community with the needs of teachers and students. By volunteering in schools, writing coaches support public education and are

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rewarded when students discover their voice or experience that “aha” moment as they make the connection between what they want to say and how to write it. As one writing coach wrote: “As a mother of school-aged children, I have struggled to find ways to support our public schools that bolsters efforts of hard-working teachers, benefits a broad sector of students, and utilizes skills I have to offer. I was delighted to discover WCM. Through numerous coaching sessions, my belief in the value of this program – and the need for this organization has continued to grow.”

WCM also provides important training opportunities for pre-service teachers studying at UM. The UM English Teaching Program (ENT) integrates volunteer work with WCM into its service learning component. By electing to participate in the training workshop and coaching students in local schools, ENT candidates gain valuable experience with middle and high school learners and teachers. One undergraduate ENT candidate wrote in his reflection journal: “Working as a volunteer writing coach has opened my eyes to the wide variety of writers within one high school classroom. I also immediately saw how the strategies I was learning in ENT 440 Teaching Writing with Dr. Chin were applied to specific writing assignments. It’s so affirming to know that what I am learning in the teaching program is practical and realistic. I think WCM should be required of all pre-service English teachers!!!” In addition to seeing the connection between their

English methods courses and the secondary English classes, the ENT candidates greatly appreciate witnessing the developmental growth of writers as they move from middle school to high school. The ENT candidates also learn how to conduct writing conferences and how to prioritize and differentiate feedback to individual learners. In turn, these candidates share their enthusiasm and growing expertise with the student writers they work with.

Favorable qualitative feedback from WCM’s coaching program is further supported by initial quantitative evidence suggesting coaching sessions do in fact lead to tangible writing improvements. In 2016, a local middle school teacher invited a UM graduate student in the English Teaching Program to collaborate on a classroom inquiry project. The teacher, graduate student, and WCM wanted to assess differences in the writing quality of students who received two WCM coaching sessions compared to students who worked with their teacher using their normal revision processes. Students were randomly assigned to a group and neither the students nor the coaches were informed of this classroom inquiry project.

The final papers for this assignment were turned in and coded so that the graduate student and two trained evaluators could not differentiate between a “coached” or a “not coached” student paper. The evaluators assessed the papers using the classroom teacher’s analytic rubric. Although

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the sample size was small (20 coached students and 15 uncoached “controls”), the papers of coached students scored consistently higher than the papers of the controls. In addition, the written student feedback from coached students suggested high retention of specific constructive advice. For example, coached students reported benefiting from discussions on the more substantive aspects of writing, such as the quality and organization of their ideas. The non-coached students (who received revision feedback from the classroom teacher) reported benefiting from classroom revision discussions in a more general nature. While this unpublished study is preliminary and relies on a small sample size, it points clearly to the efficacy of the coaching program and the benefits of individualized writing support from trained coaches. Additional research can inform how we fine-tune coaching techniques and training methods.

Program Growth and Future Directions

Writing Coaches of Missoula (renamed Writing Coaches of Montana in 2017) started in 1995 as a handful of volunteers at a drop-in high school writing center. Today, WCM has grown to 140+ trained coaches providing an anticipated 3000 coaching sessions to 1100 students across Missoula and Ravalli County schools in 2016-2017. Over the past five years, WCM has expanded to serve the outlying, more rural Missoula County middle schools (Bonner, Clinton, and Lolo) that feed into Missoula County high schools. This year, WCM added Frenchtown High School and launched a pilot expansion project in adjacent Ravalli County. We expect to grow the Ravalli County program from one to three school districts over the next two years, and ultimately hope to serve students across the entire county. By establishing a second program in Ravalli County, WCM aims to definitively demonstrate that the public can have a key role in realizing core educational objectives, and that the successful partnership in Missoula County between the community and the public schools is a sustainable model that can be

transferred to any locale.

As educators learn about WCM, we have been receiving an increasing number of inquiries from schools and districts seeking to replicate our program in communities across our region, including Whitefish (which launched a program in 2016-17). This increased interest has prompted the staff and board to initiate key steps to support thoughtful growth of our organization, and effective mechanisms to share what we do with others.

We are eager to share what we do with educators across Montana. Please visit our website (<http://www.writingcoachesofmissoula.com>), get in touch with WCM’s Executive Director Diane Benjamin (email: writingcoachesofmontana@gmail.com), and let us know how we can help you support student writers in your school.

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