



## **The Five W's of Literacy Coaching: Who? What? When? Where? Why?**

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# The Five W's of Literacy Coaching: Who? What? When? Where? Why?

by Jane Wiedlea Koehler

**P**ublic Education is at the heart of our democracy and like so many institutions designed in years past, the institution finds itself under severe criticism. Not unlike GM, the very model of American ingenuity fifty years ago, the public educational system seems out of touch with current realities. Like GM, it needs to restructure for the world of the 21st century and the children of the United States in the 21st century.

Today we are educating more children than ever. These children come from more diverse backgrounds than the Western European backgrounds of the past. Levels of expectations have changed drastically. We are no longer a nation of small farming and industrial communities. Our economy is a service economy and industry has developed a global community. Public education must change to meet these new demands.

At the very heart of this development stand our public school

teachers. These teachers generally form a cadre of incredibly devoted and hardworking individuals; some say the unsung heroes of our age. Remember the t-shirt slogan, "If you can read this, thank a teacher." But currently, by many measures, too many of our children do not even graduate from high school able to read and write well enough to provide themselves with satisfactory standard of living. National, state, and local tests indicate that up to 50% of the students entering high school can not read at grade level. Worse, statistics indicate that up to 50% of entering high school students nation-wide will not finish. The wages earned by these dropouts will probably not much exceed \$20,000 a year for life if they do not continue to educate themselves in some manner.

Much is being done to remedy this. A variety of new structures is being developed from smaller schools to changes in school boards to new certification of teachers. But, perhaps one of the most interesting developments has been the advent of the literacy coach upon the educational scene. This position, designed to improve the professionalism of teachers, occupies a place between student and teacher and is focused solely on helping the teacher deliver skills and content in a manner more suited to helping all students learn. The literacy coach comes from the ranks of teachers, has generally taught many years in the system and been recognized by peers and students as a skilled teacher. This skilled teacher leaves the individual classroom and enters many classrooms to provide professional development in working teachers' classrooms.

But, because this position is new, further training and experimenting with what works to make a teacher more effective must be done on the job. I know, because I have been a literacy coach for five years and two months, and what I know about the job now and its importance is much different and richer than when I took the job five years ago, a somewhat bushy-tailed reformer ready to redo the educational system in a single bound. Looking back five years, I do not see myself as effective in the large public high school where I coached. Today I see myself becoming more effective because of my on-the-job training. Could it be that it takes on the job experience to build an efficacious literacy coach just as it takes time and a skilled coach to build a truly efficacious teacher?

I believe the answer to that question is a resounding yes! I was well intentioned and passionate and hardworking five years ago but I did not have the same grasp on the job as I do now. Literacy depends on the skills of reading and writing but curiously one can be literate in one content area and not in another. Students have to be taught skills to navigate different content areas. The job of the literacy coach is to see that students understand and use these skills. The teacher is often preoccupied with content but content taught without a chance for students to practice the skills needed to grasp the content has proven itself useless by the current group of students who can not read and write. The old adage that "I taught but they did not learn" is unacceptable. If "they" did not learn, we, teacher and coach, must ask ourselves why and discover ways to help students learn. What is taught becomes less important than how it is

**DATE: Nov. 15**

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## THE EPICENTER OF CHANGE

Sometimes change occurs swiftly and dramatically, and sometimes we don't recognize the effects of subtle changes until much later in life. Change can be good or bad.

Being at the epicenter of an earthquake causes an immediate, disruptive change such as you might experience leaving your homeland, changing your school or losing a loved one. Being at the epicenter of your family, friends or teachers might create less obvious changes that you only fully grasp after time has passed. Also, an idea from a book, or a line from a poem or play might resonate in your head long after you read it.

In a poem, short story or essay, describe a change in your life. The change may have been huge and immediately felt. On the other hand, it may have resulted from words or events from the past that you only now identify as agents of change.

**AWARD CATEGORIES:**  
Awards will be given in the following divisions:

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- Grades 9-10
- Grades 11-12
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**TO ENTER:**  
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taught. The literacy coach tries to help the teacher navigate this divide.

At the heart of all coaching has to be trust and this is the hardest piece to build. Yet really this is also at the heart of all teaching. Openness to learning has to be the part of the trust that develops. Development of openness and trust between teachers and coaches happens slowly but is essential before real progress can be made. Real change of heart comes slowly and investment in time in terms of literacy coaches' salaries and training must become systemic.

Trained while in the position of a literacy coach coaching in cognitive coaching, consulting, and collaboration in group and individual situations where teachers are present, I, as a literacy coach over five years, have developed into a useful and needed member of the school community. I am gradually becoming a literacy coach who does help teachers attain the degree of professional ability they wish and who is a partner in helping them effectively teach all the students in their classrooms. In the year to come, I hope to work as a coach-partner in more classrooms.

However, in the public high school where I work, some teachers still view me with suspicion, not realizing that I help to fill the gap between student and teacher rather than the gap between administration and teacher. I am sorry for this perception but can only continue to work. Many do see that I provide support to them in the classroom in a variety of ways. Understood correctly, the position of the literacy coach offers the teacher an outside observer who can watch while the teacher performs and aid the teacher to understand the link between teacher delivery and student perception.

While I see my real job as working one-on-one to improve teacher effectiveness, I also meet the demands of the larger system by presenting to groups of teachers new curricula designed to improve student literacy, and I do consult and offer strategies to solve immediate problems for a teacher. I also act as delivery girl of books, supplies, assessment materials, and offer a helping hand when the going gets rough, and sympathy when teacher effort does not always equal success. The teacher and I are engaged in "people work", a most complex of endeavors. Most teachers and the coaches that I know are dedicated to improving the lives of all of their students all of the time. We are forging new partnerships to achieve this end. Our work will not bring an instant fix to an ailing educational organization but over time a new teaching and coaching staff will emerge better able to understand and truly teach all our diverse students.

Nonetheless, such training will not be cheap for the public in the short run; it will require major public funding over a long time. But the cost in impoverished lives of dropouts and citizens who remain illiterate and unable to make informed, logical choices will be a greater cost to our society in the long run. Therefore, we must have the courage to financially support the vision of professional teaching corps sustained by a well trained literacy coaching staff despite the development costs over time.

#### About the Author:

Jane Koehler worked for six years as the UCLA Leadership and Literacy partner at Venice High School Los Angeles. She has taught grades 9-12 at all ability levels from regular classes to AP Literature in LAUSD schools.

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