



The Classroom Coach

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Date: November 2008

This paper was originally published in California English Journal, Volume 14(2), November 2008. It is reprinted here with the permission of the publisher as well as the National Writing Project (NWP). The mission of NWP is to improve the teaching of writing and improve learning in the nation's schools. Explore NWP's resources at www.nwp.org.

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The Classroom Coach

by Rebecca Alber

When I was hired by UCLA as a literacy coach in a partnership with Los Angeles Unified School District, I didn't fully understand the job. I was to support teachers and classroom instruction, yes, but what did that entail? How did that look?

With a copy of the National Council of Teachers of English Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches, I set off to figure it out. I shadowed several other literacy coaches at the schools in South Los Angeles where they are assigned. While they visited classrooms, talked with teachers, planned workshops, I followed, furiously jotting notes. I asked questions and wrote down their coach advice, their do's and don'ts. I searched online for some magical guidelines or "how to" on coaching urban high school English teachers. By the end of the week, I was more nervous and confused than I had been on the day I interviewed for the job. What had I got myself into? Then I remembered my first month as a teacher. I thought of the morning when only three weeks in the classroom, I couldn't manage to put my hand on the car door so I could get in and drive to work. "I cannot do this another day," I thought over and over. I stood in my driveway and considered quitting. I had three different classes to prepare for and five keys to the five classrooms where I taught. There were too many students, not enough desks, and I had little, if any, classroom control.

John C. Fremont High School where I am assigned to coach is very similar to the school where I'd taught for seven years—located in a poor, urban area, high teacher turnover, and a significant number of new teachers, some fully credentialed, but many not. I had an inkling that the 11 brand-new English teachers I'd be supporting would probably feel the same way I had that morning standing in my driveway — unsure, exhausted and overwhelmed. But I also remember feeling very determined. That's what made me finally open my car door, by the way. "So what does a coach do?" a second year teacher asks me my first week on the job. I'll call him Mr. F. "I'm here to support you so you can better support students," I reply. "Like teaching my class if I am tired," jokes Mr. F. We laugh. "I could teach a demo-lesson and then we can talk about it afterwards." He looks at me suspiciously and with some indifference. I smile, "I'm not an evaluator, what we talk about stays in this room."

Four months later, Mr. F. accepts my offer. It took regular drop-bys to his class with resources (and sometimes chocolate), several non-school related conversations, a lunch together, a joke or two, and sharing my own teaching foibles before he finally lets me come to his second and fourth periods to teach a lesson on Revising Writing to his 11th grade English students. It takes that long to build trust. (I don't take it personally. I know I have his best interest in mind; we just had to wait until he knew this too.) Following another demo-lesson in a

more seasoned teacher's classroom (another on writing, strategies for getting started and creating that first draft) she commented, "I never thought to write with the students. They kept watching you and seemed motivated by you writing with them." I smile and agree with her. I could reply, "Yes, writing with them is important." But I don't. I don't want her to think I am implying that since she has not written before with them, that her writing instruction is somehow lacking or substandard. So instead, I share my experience. I share how I began writing with students my third year teaching, after attending the South Basin Writing Project in Long Beach. How I remembered both the vulnerability of writing in a fluorescent-lit room with others and also the sheer power of it. How it helped convert my classroom from a place primarily of instruction into a productive writing and reading workshop. Early on as a literacy coach, I found myself again and again reflecting on my teaching experiences and practices to help connect with teachers.

This is my third year working as a literacy coach and I'm clear on the definition of the job. It is collaboration between two teachers—one in and one out of the classroom. It is a relationship, and as with all relationships, it takes a considerable amount of time to build trust. I am thinking of Mrs. P., a 12-year veteran teacher who recently broke down while sharing that in one day, two female students had both shown her scars from a bullet wound. "Why does this happen?" she asks, "And how do I keep doing this job?" I listen, I nod, but do not reply with words. Instead, we sit, looking at each other both knowing that she will return the next day and most likely the following year, that this is just one of those days when such realities, like inner-city violence or child abuse, get the best of you. Mrs. P. needs someone not to solve or even console, merely to listen. Someone who knows what she is talking about and understands this part of being an urban high school teacher. I can relate. (While teaching in Long Beach, I had students who had been shot and wounded, one student killed, and one incarcerated for murder.)

It took me about a year in this job to figure out when to listen and when to talk. As a literacy coach, I experiment with words, when to consult, ask questions, clarify, comment or confirm. Teaching is a challenging job. Teaching in an urban school, entangled in politics and affected by social conditions far beyond any one person's control is not at all easy. True, that the support I mostly give is around curriculum and pedagogical practice with an emphasis on literacy strategies. But sometimes the job is simply about being a good listener.

About the Author:

Rebecca Alber continues to enjoy collaborating with teachers. When she is not at work as a literacy coach or as an online instructor for CLAD courses, she is mostly likely surfing.