



## **What is the Work of a Literacy Coach? An Introduction**

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## **Abstract**

What is the work of a literacy coach? During a weekend retreat funded by an Urban Sites Network mini-grant, 12 Writing Project teacher consultants and literacy coaches from Los Angeles grappled with this question through reflection and writing resulting in publishable pieces that made the work of literacy coaches visible.

# **What is the Work of a Literacy Coach?**

## **An Introduction**

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What does the work of a literacy coach look like? How does it manifest itself in schools and classrooms? Does a literacy coach's work actually result in improvement in student achievement? And how does a literacy coach's support create change in a large urban school district that serves over 800,000 students and 35,000 teachers? In the fast paced, high stakes environment of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), twelve Writing Project teacher consultants/literacy coaches participated in a weekend writing retreat that allowed them to reflect on these questions and figure out what it really means to be a literacy coach.

The UCLA Writing Project and Local District 3, one of eight local districts in LAUSD, have sustained a partnership in providing instructional support with literacy coaches for over a decade. For the past six years, UCLA Writing Project Literacy and Leadership Partners, or literacy coaches, have supported the work in 27 secondary schools, providing support and leadership in professional development, promoting writing in the classroom, assisting in a myriad of school and district initiatives from disciplinary and content literacy, to the implementation of intervention reading programs, small learning communities and student work focused study groups. Even though each year state test scores show greater improvement at schools with UCLA Writing Project literacy coaches

than with non-Writing Project coaches, many still wonder about the work and effectiveness of literacy coaches.

Recently, the UCLA Writing Project, under the direction of co-Director Jane Hancock, organized a weekend writing retreat in order to afford coaches an opportunity to further reflect on their work as a coach. Although these literacy coaches reflect upon their work regularly, they rarely have time to formalize these reflections into written pieces. This retreat, funded by an Urban Sites minigrant, not only provided structured time for these Writing Project literacy coaches to write, it also helped many of them clarify and define their work for themselves. Furthermore, as the end product of the grant, participants investigated possible publishing outlets for their writing to make their work visible, allowing administrators, politicians, and the general public to read about the efficacy and success of our coaching community.

### **Considering the Nature of Our Craft**

For this retreat, the participants were asked to write a vignette about their work as a coach. Born out of a vignette writing process experienced by one of the facilitators, Carrie Usui, at a National Writing Project Research Division retreat, the facilitators chose to focus on the vignette because it draws on the reflection, personal connection and voice of the writer while still describing an experience. Participants of the Urban Sites Network Vignette Project reflected upon their practice over a weekend retreat. Even in the 100-plus degree heat of Palm Desert, these literacy coaches produced the beginnings of writing pieces that encapsulated their work as coaches.

As Writing Project fellows, the participants were ready for the Art Peterson-like mini-lesson presented by Jane Hancock to brainstorm possible writing topics. Then, following the Writing Project model of writing groups, participants were divided into groups to dialogue around their writing.

Literacy coaches often struggle with the question of “Where do I start?” when it comes to how they want to work within their schools. This same question came up for many of the participants when thinking about how to represent their work as a coach in their writing. Middle school literacy coach Susan Strauss asserts, “. . . finding a topic that reflected our work and using that seed as the catalyst for a professional article for the NWP Urban Sites Grant presented the best of all challenges, an avalanche of good ideas.”

In meeting this challenge, participants gained insights and clarity from their writing groups, using this space as a place to dialogue around their common successes and challenges. “Just as teachers find valuable time with their colleagues to talk and connect, so do literacy coaches,” said Becky Alber, literacy coach from Local District 7. By the end of the weekend, all of the participants walked away with the beginnings of a vignette reflecting the essence of their work and a writing group to help them continue the revision process for publication.

Two months later, with the coaches in the thick of the new school year, participants gathered for a day to read and workshop a more polished piece of writing before sending

it out for dissemination and publication. Although the busy school year prevented some participants from returning, the majority returned to their writing, committed to finishing what they started and spreading the word about their work.

### **Meeting the Needs of an Urban School District**

In reading the finished pieces of the literacy coaches, it became obvious that their role and work involves a multitude of topics. Articles ranged from specific projects, like David Lerner’s article about starting a writing academy that published hundreds of student-created books, to encapsulating the role of a coach, like Erin Powers’s article about switching from a “builder” as a teacher to being ingrained in the “frame” of the school. Some articles covered the long range of the work, like Jane Hancock’s history of a 12-year Language Arts Cadre that partners with the UCLA Writing Project, to a look at the beginnings of the work, like Becky Alber’s reflection of her first days as a literacy coach. Lastly, there were articles that exuded the passion of individual coaches, from Susan Strauss’s, encouraging students to “write like crazy” to Jane Koehler’s determination to address the Achievement Gap at her school. Each piece illustrated how these literacy coaches address the needs of their urban schools and how through their work, they are able to create and support avenues for success. Furthermore, these coaches understand the trust and rapport necessary in creating these avenues for success at their schools and through their writing they show how they have fostered these relationships.

## **Making the “Invisible” Work Visible**

The final component of this grant included an Author’s Night for the participants. All of the participants were asked to invite someone, anyone who they felt would benefit from hearing their words about their work. Principals, assistant principals, Writing Project directors, and fellow teachers accompanied their literacy coaches after school to attend this Author’s Night and hear their coaches’ “invisible” work become visible.

Furthermore, the participants found publications, administrators, school board members, politicians, and superintendents to send their articles to and continue to spread the word about their work. By making the work of literacy coaches visible through their writing, these vignettes illustrate how literacy coaches increase student achievement at schools through the relationships and collaboration they forge with teachers and students. As high school literacy coach Jane Koehler expresses, “The teacher and I are engaged in ‘people work,’ the most complex of endeavors...dedicated to improving the lives of all of their students, all of the time.”

Ultimately, whether their piece ends up as a potential publication for *California English* or received by their local school board member, these coaches benefited from writing about their work. As Becky states, “The Urban [Sites Network] Writing Grant gave us an opportunity to not only document our coaching successes but an opportunity to celebrate them collectively as well. Because of this experience, I am better at articulating the role and importance of a literacy coach.”