

The Writers' Room™ Program: Evaluation

By Ellen Kolba

From the day in 1993 when we were handed our first grant money to start a writing center at Montclair High School, we have been asked to demonstrate our effectiveness. It is of course not unreasonable to be held accountable; in fact, we relished the opportunity to show what a good idea we had and what a welcome service we were providing. The big question was—and still is—How?

At the start, when Sheila and I were doing everything and basically making it up as we went along (after all, we had little in the way of useful models), we kept a notebook on the desk for students to sign in when they arrived at our cramped office. Before long, though, we had moved into the classrooms, creating the model that we still use. Coaches were scheduled into individual classes as close to once a week as we could manage, and the easiest way to keep track of how many students we worked with was to hang onto the weekly schedules, see how many coaches worked in each period of the day, assume that each coach saw three to four students, then do the math.

We also had our yellow sheets—the duplicates of the coaches' responses—filed neatly by class, and we could count those. If we were able to snag copies of the students' first and second drafts, we could do something even more important. We could look at the nature of the revisions. Did students use the coaches' suggestions to help them make their writing clearer and more complete? Did some students go beyond the suggested revisions and begin to re-see and re-think what they had written? Or were some students stuck, unable to do more than make a few superficial corrections?

For a long time, even as The Writers' Room™ Program expanded into the middle schools and then the elementary schools, our Board of Education was content with the head counts we provided and approved our budget annually. We could also supplement our count of students coached with a count of coaches recruited and trained. And our growing connection with Montclair State University and its teacher-education program gave us additional evidence of effectiveness.

Six or seven years ago, when the first inquiries about hard data came from the Board of Education, we turned to the scores on New Jersey's Language Arts/Literacy Assessment. Montclair has had consistently good results on these tests, given originally in grades 4, 8, and 11 and now in grades 3-8 and grade 11. But could The Writers' Room™ Program claim sole credit for this? Obviously, not.

Little by little, we've come to the realization that we need a true evaluation, conducted by an outside research group, with a focus on both quantitative and qualitative data. Last year at this time, I wrote a grant proposal, and The Writers' Room™ Program received money from The Schumann Fund of New Jersey to hire ActKnowledge, an independent research and assessment group located at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Their study is underway, and I will be reporting on both the process and the results in this space every month. So stay tuned!