

**Improving Writing Instruction
Through Professional Learning Communities**

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Abstract

Proficiency in written communication is an essential skill for achieving success in post-secondary education, as well as in professional work in most occupations and organizational structures. Therefore, young people with low levels of proficiency in writing face an insidious, invisible barrier to entry to successful college and career pathways. A More Perfect Union High School is a small, high-performing urban charter school. Despite relative success, AMPUHS is unable to fulfill its stated goal of having all graduates be college-ready writers. Furthermore, teachers at AMPUHS do not have a common model of writing instruction. In this action research study, I engaged with a group of five other AMPUHS educators in a collaborative and reflective process to improve writing instruction at our school. Over a period of seven weeks, we met six times, covering a linked sequence of topics designed to develop a shared understanding of the culture, structures, and processes that relate to the teaching of writing at our school. As the study progressed, we allowed the autonomously expressed interest of the group to adjust our course, which resulted in substantial deviation from the original set sequence. Much of our time was dedicated to the analysis and comparison of representative samplings of AMPUHS student writing: we looked at trends within grade levels, trends in growth or lack of growth across grade levels, and trends in what kinds of writing prompts elicited what kinds of responses from what students. We also used SBAC-released rubrics to calibrate our own grading of AMPUHS student writing and compared it with samples of non-AMPUHS student writing of differing levels of proficiency. We spent time discussing the structures and benefits of a widely used set of graphic organizers designed to scaffold and support AMPUHS students in writing essays.

Through engagement in our action research inquiry cycle, our group surfaced highly effective practices of writing instruction as well as shared challenges and emerging tensions between competing goals in student writing growth. Major lines of meaning-making included: processes for relating evidence to claims; the need to scaffold the writing process to build proficiency in basic structures as well as the need to remove those scaffolds so that the processes can be internalized by students; the tension between growing student capacity to respond to increasingly complex prompts and the way in which high cognitive complexity of task can result in less clear student writing. Process and impact data from the action research contained a wealth of information around the modalities in which teachers interact around content and how facilitative structure can improve equity of voice in constructing meaning. Finally, this action research study serves as a cautionary tale: over the course of the study, my positional responsibilities at the school changed substantially, fundamentally altering my ability to implement the action research with fidelity to its original planned scope and sequence.

Context and Problem of Practice:

It is sad to say, but it seems that the story of America after World War II is one of rising economic prosperity going hand in hand with rising economic inequality. While all Americans have profited to some degree from advances in technology and healthcare, the slices of the American pie have never been more uneven. In 2007, the wealthiest 20% of the American population possessed 80% of all financial assets, and the bottom 80% owned only 15% of all wealth (Hurst, 2007). The extent to which wealth inequality is a moral and humanitarian concern will continue to be a subject of debate; but the pattern of history is very clear – societies with high levels of inequality rarely continue in their present form for long.

In the American experiment, one of the persistent causes of wealth inequality is an academic achievement gap that manifests itself along socioeconomic and racial lines. Broadly speaking, children growing up in poverty have lower rates of academic achievement than children whose parents are wealthy (Reardon, 2011). Low academic achievement acts as a barrier of entry to the institutions of higher education that traditionally have acted, and largely continue to act, as filters to screen candidates for access to highly compensated professional careers (Reardon, Baker & Klasik, 2012). Thus, the children of poverty are largely unable to participate in the occupations that would allow them to pull themselves and their families out of poverty, and must pursue the dwindling number of employment opportunities that provide low-skilled workers with a living wage (Saez, 2012).

Another phenomenon in the late 20th and early 21st century American narrative is to locate responsibility for this situation at the feet of a system of public education that has been deemed to be in “crisis” since the 1970’s (Silberman, 1971), and a risk to national welfare since 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). One reaction to this narrative of educational crisis has been the creation of “charter” schools, starting in Minnesota in 1991, with the goal of promoting educational reform by breaking the geographic monopoly of public school districts on providing public education. Since the 90’s, the “charter movement” has grown rapidly, especially in urban areas, and some charter schools have experienced great success (Premack, 1996). However, despite the relative success of some schools, one issue that charter schools have continued to struggle with is what has been termed “college persistence”. College persistence is defined as a student’s persistence through and graduation from college after having been accepted. While statistics in this area can be murky, high estimates of top charter networks place college persistence at 45%; the national average of college persistence for low-income students who make it to enroll in college is only 9%. (KIPP, 2011) In the context of the national achievement gap, graduates of charter schools

struggle to complete college degrees, and therefore struggle to cross the final educational span that allows access to highly-compensated professional occupations. Ultimately, the promise of “college-prep” remains unfulfilled.

One strand of the problem of college persistence has been the high number of graduates of urban high schools who require remediation in writing when they enroll in higher education. The need for remediation can be restated as a lack of true college-readiness in writing at the time of their graduation from high school, and this lack of college-ready writing skills poses a grave danger for the college persistence of students. Data shows that students who are recommended for remediation when they enter higher education have very low rates of college graduation.¹

A More Perfect Union High School is a high-performing and stable urban charter school in East Oakland. In operation since 2003, over the past seven years, AMPUHS has consistently posted scores on state accountability standards that place it in the top tier of all high schools in Oakland. By some measures, it is the highest performing 9 through 12 public high school in the city of Oakland. (Innovate Public Schools, 2015)

Nevertheless, AMPUHS’s ability to graduate students who persist through college is a mirror of national data; AMPUHS’s internal metrics indicate that only one in five of our students persist to obtain their college degree. Furthermore, a sustained pattern of data has indicated that the majority of AMPUHS students do not achieve college readiness in writing by the time of their graduation from AMPUHS. Current pedagogical strategies of writing instruction, whether or not implemented with fidelity, have so far not been successful in changing this situation. Historically, as measured by the California State University’s EAP test of College Ready Writing, roughly 20% or less of AMPUHS 11th graders are ready for college level writing in the spring of their 11th grade.² The increase in passage rates for students who choose to retest in their senior year is low. In addition to the statistical linkage between the need for remediation and low rates of college graduation, AMPUHS alumni also report struggling with the differing nature of assessment in college, where one or two high stakes exams (often with a timed writing component) and one or two high stakes papers determine whether or not a student passes or fails a class. In college, our students often have only three or four chances per semester to demonstrate proficiency, typically in a different form and with

¹ Compounding the costs is the fact that remedial students are more likely to drop out of college without a degree. Less than 50 percent of re-medial students complete their recommended remedial courses. Less than 25 percent of remedial students at community colleges earn a certificate or degree within eight years.

Students in remedial reading or math have particularly dismal chances of success. A U.S. Department of Education study found that 58 percent of students who do not require remediation earn a bachelor’s degree, compared to only 17 percent of students enrolled in re-medial reading and 27 percent of students enrolled in remedial math. (NCSL, 2016)

² EAP Data by Year for AMPUHS—Students Scored as English College Ready in Writing: 2010-11 5%, 2011-12 10%, 2012-13 3%, 2013-14 9%, 2014-15 21%

less structure and scaffolding than that they have experienced as they progressed through school at AMPUHS.

All of these stark conditions underscore the urgent need for maximal instructional effectiveness in writing at A More Perfect Union High School. The majority of our students enter our school below grade level in reading and writing. This means that in order to successfully address the problem of college readiness and college persistence, AMPUHS teachers must be able to move students through five to eight years of academic growth in writing during the window of only four years that students are present at AMPUHS. Evidence suggests that this is educational outcome is uncommon, but possible, with highly effective teachers (Center for Public Education, 2016).

However, as with most urban schools, AMPUHS relies on teachers who have relatively little experience. Out of four teachers currently in the AMPUHS English department, no teachers have over four years of experience at the high school level. Three out of four of the English teachers are either in their first or second year of teaching at AMPUHS, or in the teaching profession. Furthermore, the trend at AMPUHS has been for teachers to either leave the school or be promoted out of the classroom within four to five years of beginning work at the school. Currently, out of 19 classroom teachers at AMPUHS, only two teachers have been at the school more than four years.

In this context of continual teacher turnover, it is vitally important that curriculum resources exist for teachers that reflect a common model of instruction for teaching writing that is effective with our students and is effectively aligned over grade levels. However at AMPUHS, while shared instructional materials exist concerning writing instruction as well as a grade-level scope and sequence document, neither the existing materials nor practices of writing instruction are implemented consistently and coherently across classrooms. The high autonomy and low support environment, paired with frequent teacher turnover, lead to a situation requiring constant reinvention of effective teaching techniques, at a high cost to both teachers and students.

Prior to this intervention, AMPUHS Administration had made several efforts to address issues of curriculum and teacher-training in the ELA department. In the Fall of 2014, AMPUHS was sponsored with a complete set of English 3D curriculum for all students in the 9th and 10th grade classes. Developed by Dr Kate Kinsella, English 3D is a curriculum structured to support English Language Learners, and is fully scripted. It contains instructional materials for reading, writing, and vocabulary development, in sequenced units with matched readings. The incoming 9th and 10th grade ELA teachers, both of whom were in their first year teaching at AMPUHS, were encouraged to use these materials, and to attend free in-service trainings around their use. Given the option to use English 3D or create their own instructional materials, despite their lack of their own curriculum and being encouraged by the Administration to use English 3D, both the 9th and 10th grade ELA teachers ultimately declined to implement English 3D, or to

attend in-service trainings around its use, and at year-end, the sets of books remained on the shelves, largely unused and gathering dust.

Again, in the Spring of 2015, AMPUHS Administration identified writing instruction as a critical area for growth. At the suggestion of a teacher in the Math Department, the researcher and a member of the ELA Department visited a charter school in Visalia, which had been identified for its high performance in state accountability measures in ELA, and in particular, in writing. The visiting team interviewed the lead English teacher at the school, and attempted to distill the most salient features of the “Visalia model” and bring them back to AMPUHS. The researcher then was charged with leading the English department, and attempted to build an internal consensus to carry out an instructional shift in writing based on the Visalia model. The proposed “Visalia model” included mandated amounts of protected writing time in class for students, but granted teacher autonomy in choosing how to structure and manage the protected writing time. Teachers agreed in initial goal-setting meetings to the structure or protected writing time, and expressed initial enthusiasm for the shift to a focus on writing. However, at the beginning of the next school year, it quickly became apparent that with the exception of the English teacher who was on the visiting team to Visalia, other teachers in the department were not observing the agreement for protected writing time each week. The researcher began a program of weekly, announced observations of ELA classrooms with the goal of encouraging consistency in maintaining agreed amounts of writing time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, after a few weeks of these announced observations, push back began “behind closed doors” about the level of coaching and administrative oversight received by the English department compared to other departments at AMPUHS. Ultimately, the researcher ceased conducting weekly observations and the “Visalia” initiative sputtered to a close and then vanished without a trace.

Thus, prior to this intervention, two attempts to create a common model of instruction in ELA had failed at AMPUHS: one which tried to impose an externally-created curriculum selected by school leadership and another which tried to impose an externally-created model of instruction, but leave autonomy concerning curriculum to teachers. Clearly, a different approach would be necessary to achieve success. This intervention aimed to research and implement that different approach and create a common model of teaching writing and increase teacher effectiveness in teaching writing at A More Perfect Union High School.

Literature Review

Introduction:

In the following review, I will broadly survey literature related to the Problem of Practice at AMPUHS: the failure of existing teacher practice to enable AMPUHS students to achieve college ready proficiency in writing by time of graduation. As part of examining this problem I will examine, in turn, the following areas:

- the predominance of literacy development over writing development in existing teacher training programs
- the existence of a nation-wide trend of lack of college-readiness in writing among high school graduates, with particularly negative consequences for students who enter college in remedial status
- the challenges of implementing reform in the American school system through both “scripted curriculum” and “top-down” initiatives
- the power of Professional Learning Communities to achieve improvement in teacher practice and student outcomes
- facilitative structures to maximize effectiveness of PLCs including student work analysis protocols, peer observation, lesson tuning, and consultancy protocols
- a selected review of existing strategies to teach writing including Self Regulated Strategy Development, writing templates to teach argumentative writing, and the Structured Process approach

I argue that the literature supports that the most effective way to improve teacher effectiveness in teaching writing at AMPUHS is not a one-time instructional shift, but a sustained effort to build a professional learning community that will continuously work to reflect on and improve practice in writing instruction.

Why Teaching Writing is the Problem:

For a substantial period of time, across the scope of public education, student reading and literacy development have predominated over writing development in both efforts at curriculum reform in US public education and in academic research on education (Graham & Perin, 2007). The predominance of literacy over writing may have been caused by the very structures of the standardized testing regimes designed to hold schools accountable for student achievement, since these tests, like the STAR tests and SAT’s, until recently tested students almost exclusively on reading comprehension skills (Graham & Perin, 2007). In any case, in contrast to research about best practices in literacy instruction, researchers are still developing knowledge of what successful writing instruction looks like in schools (Graham & Perin, 2007). This gap is mirrored in the professional training that teachers receive with the majority of teachers receiving little or no preparation in writing instruction in their teacher-education programs, as well as during their in-service training (Kiuahara, 2009; Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

This national deficit in writing pedagogy manifests itself at AMPUHS in an unfortunate but predictable fashion. In addition to being new to the teaching profession, AMPUHS's ELA teachers also report having little training in writing instruction prior coming to AMPUHS, in keeping with national trends. Furthermore, as opposed to employing curriculum provided by the school site or employing commercially created curriculum, AMPUHS teachers create the majority of their own writing curriculum as they go. Teachers with only a basic background in writing instruction can be expected to struggle in moving the writing proficiency of their students (NCWAFSC, 2003). The AMPUHS ELA department has primary responsibility in the school for improving student writing outcomes, but they have little training or experience in writing instruction. Thus, it should not be considered surprising that the majority of AMPUHS students are not college ready in writing by time of graduation.

Teaching writing is the problem, a situation that is mirrored nation-wide by a troubling lack of college readiness in writing among high school graduates (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2003).

Challenges in Improving Teaching Writing and Developing a Common Model of Writing Instruction:

However, if the problem is teaching writing, it can be challenging to improve teaching. As is eloquently stated by David Tyack and Larry Cuban in their 1995 book, *Tinkering toward Utopia*, the idea of social salvation through school reform is a distinctly American preoccupation (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Thus, AMPUHS efforts like the failed English 3D and "Visalia Model" initiatives have been commonplace in American education. But the incremental pace of change in our education system is a testament to another feature of American Individualism: the persistent refusal of teachers to give up their autonomy once the classroom door closes (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). In the case of English 3D, the response was symbolic acceptance (the 10th grade English teacher taught her first unit out of English 3D), then fitful compliance (the students brought their books less and less to class), and then, when the fitful compliance was unaddressed, extinguishment of the externally imposed curriculum.

In hindsight, this outcome is in keeping with experiments in "scripted curriculum" at many other American schools (Valencia, 2006; Datnow and Castellano, 2012). Case studies of schools and teachers using scripted curriculum reveal that even when teachers were supportive of an externally-imposed, scripted curriculum, they still made adaptations and departures from the script (Valencia, 2006). Furthermore, even in schools where teachers had voted for an external curriculum, support was very mixed several years after implementation; with the teachers who were most supportive of the external curriculum being those who identified it as fitting their instructional style (Datnow and Castellano, 2012). Another component of American Individualism also seems highly relevant: teachers feel devalued when "teaching to a text" and the teachers who are

seen as strongest and most creative are known for creating their own instructional materials (Ball and Cohen, 1996). To put it another way, teachers “got bored” of teaching to a scripted curriculum (Datnow and Castellano, 2012).

When asked to achieve a set instructional goal that is outside of their existing capacity, teachers often ask for support – often asking for pre-made curriculum as a concrete sign of support. But, if the premade curriculum that is provided is highly structured (like English 3D), the premade curriculum is only used when the teacher finds it a natural fit with their own teaching style (Datnow and Castellano, 2012). For whatever reason, it seems like this is rarely the case. Often, when teachers try to implement a scripted curriculum, they perceive that it “does not work in the classroom” or they feel “it’s a bitch to teach” (Datnow and Castellano, 2012). Of course, when teachers do not enjoy teaching the scripted curriculum, they have little internal incentive to report that the curriculum is effective. For some teachers, providing scripted curriculum as a support may be worse than providing no support at all, as teachers may choose not to implement a curriculum that seems ineffective to them and then also come into structural conflict with school leadership for failing to implement the curriculum (Datnow and Castellano, 2012).

But if this explains the downfall of English 3D at AMPUHS, what was the problem with the “Visalia Model”? The instructional shift was designed to have a much broader framework, allowing teacher autonomy in choosing methods of writing instruction, as long as a certain amount of instructional time was used for writing each week. A broad instructional strategy around writing was explained, adaptable to multiple writing orientations. The researcher worked hard to build group consensus through managing individual relations with teachers, and teachers expressed initial enthusiasm for the shift. Given that the teachers expressed enthusiasm and consensus for a focus on improving writing instruction, why was it that this initial enthusiasm so quickly faded as implementation of the instructional shift began?

This second endeavor in instructional shift around the “Visalia Model” is also a textbook case study for another frequent challenge with educational reform – “contrived collegiality”. In his 1991 article of the same name, Andrew Hargreaves lists factors of authentic collaborative working relationships. In Hargreaves’ view, authentic collaboration is spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable. In contrast, “contrived collegiality” is: administratively-regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable (Hargreaves, 1991). Sadly, the “Visalia model” shift featured all of these characteristics. It was a particular example of what Hargreaves views as a blind spot for administrative efforts to harness collegiality; it tried to set members of a compulsory group to be accountable for implementation of a goal mandated from the top down by school leadership. Via this model, the perceived initial enthusiastic consensus was the avoidance of conflict with hierarchy (Hargreaves, 1991). Face to face conflict might have been more productive, as it would have allowed surfacing of the teacher’s

actually internally-held resistance to the plan and their internal questions about the plan's efficacy.

Edgar Schein lays out a framework for institutional change that posits the necessity for the following steps in the change process of a group: disconfirming data, survival anxiety, high safety, cognitive redefinition, and refreezing (Schein, 2004). Analyzed by this model, the disconfirming data introduced by administration to the ELA department was insufficient to cause survival anxiety at a level great enough to mobilize change. There are several reasons why this might be the case (Schein, 2004). First of all, low writing achievement in AMPUHS students is only the symptom of a problem. Prior to an accurate diagnosis, it is arguable as to what the cause of the problem is. Teachers were not involved in a process by which they gathered and analyzed the data of low writing proficiency. Therefore, it was natural that they might not take the same reasoning of causation that was implied by the choices of administration: that low writing achievement was linked to incorrect teacher instructional practices, and therefore teacher instructional practices needed to be changed.

As interpreted by Schein's model for organizational change, while AMPUHS ELA teachers expressed consensus that our students should be writing at a higher level, this consensus and the imperative of administration was insufficient to mobilize them to forfeit their own established zone of autonomy (discretion over use of classroom time) in favor of administratively-suggested guidelines. In order to shift instruction and teacher behavior, one of two courses would be necessary:

The first pathway to changing behavior could revolve around increasing teacher survival anxiety around curriculum non-compliance (Datnow and Castellano, 2012). AMPUHS administration could monitor curriculum implementation and raise the stakes of failure to implement curriculum with fidelity (i.e. create a clear reward and discipline system). Perhaps it was the perception of AMPUHS ELA teachers that the researcher was moving along this pathway that led to pushback against weekly, announced classroom observations. Clearly, a different pathway to changing instructional practice was necessary at AMPUHS.

Improving Student Outcomes with the PLC Model:

Another possible pathway to changing instructional practice in writing is to support teachers in creating improved models of teaching writing that they will autonomously choose to implement within their own classrooms. The era of No Child Left Behind accountability measures provided many opportunities to observe schools attempt to improve instruction in response to external pressures (Corcoran, 2001). The research emerging from this period of time seems to suggest that mandating instructional change from the outside-in and the top down can be difficult for a variety of reasons (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Ball and Cohen, 1996; Guskey and Yoon, 2009; Corcoran, 2001). Instead growing consensus has emerged behind teacher-led

professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means of improving instructional outcomes (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Research suggests that students in a school environment characterized by authentic pedagogy will have gains in authentic achievement, and that professionalized and professionally-empowered teachers active in improving their practice in a high-trust, de-privatized professional learning community are more likely to engage in authentic pedagogy (Louis & Marks, 1996). Strong professional communities empower teachers to improve their practice, and succeed by placing high value on teachers as professionals and on the urgency of educational work (Louis & Kruse, 1995). In short, successful schools are built around a professionalized community of successful teachers who prioritize the success of their students.

Research around PLC implementation has established some useful best practices around trying to foster an effective PLC at a given school site. According to research, five things characterize successful professional communities: shared values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue (Louis & Kruse, 1995). PLCs are most effective when they center authentically around teacher's work: closing the gap between expectations for student achievement and actual student outcomes (Hawley and Valli, 1999). Also, it is particularly useful to have teachers build subject knowledge by focusing on student's response to materials of learning i.e. analysis of student work (Little, 2006).

It is strongly recommended by research that PLCs be empowered with meaningful autonomy in both setting their goals and their path to achieving their goals (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hargreaves, 1991). Teachers should exert collective control over important decisions affecting curriculum (Little, 2006; Hargreaves, 1991). Additionally, PLCs should not be an "add-on" to existing teacher work. PLCs should take place inside the context of the school and be closely engaged within the authentic work of the school (Little, 2006).

In *Creating and Sustaining Professional Communities*, K.S. Louis makes very useful implementation suggestions to enhance the authenticity of the PLC, many of which are in line with avoiding the pitfalls explained in Hargreaves' analysis of "contrived collegiality". First of all, school leaders should be careful not to undermine or make redundant existing collaborative structures (Louis, 2008). The goal of the PLC is to harness and encourage authentic professional collaboration amongst teachers. Therefore, teachers may naturally hesitate to engage in work that seems to duplicate or contradict what they are already autonomously engaged in. The PLC should also not be set up as an accountability structure, or teachers will likely be reluctant to engage (Louis, 2008). PLC implementation must take into account individual as well as group and institutional needs, and take into account that these needs may conflict (Louis, 2008). The PLC model thrives on high levels of institutional trust, like so much of what occurs within a school. Trust must be maintained both between teachers and between teachers

and administrators. The PLC is a powerful model to the extent that it shifts teacher work from isolation and individual practice to a communal and evolving consensus on problems of practice. This process will only be effective when individuals in the group feel high enough levels of trust to open up their practice to the group and, by extension, to the school and school administrators. Administrators and school leadership must be willing to model the change view themselves or teachers may be “likely to look cynically at an administrator-initiated change” (Louis, 2008).

In terms of recommendations for the actual structure and focus of the PLC, research also suggests several useful guidelines. Hawley and Valli argue that PLC’s are most effective when they solve problems that are authentic to the immediate work of teachers, like the gap between expectations for students and actual student achievement (Hawley & Valli, 1999). This suggests that it is highly useful for the PLC to articulate group expectations around student achievement before embarking on the work of instructional shift. Ideally, a group analysis of actual student work is part of this process, to clearly assess where students meet and do not meet expectations (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Taking into account the individual teaching style and teaching contexts of each teacher and each classroom is critical to the success of any efforts to improve instructional outcomes, and one of the strengths of the PLC as implemented in a high-trust environment is the capacity for members to authentically engage in a reflective dialogue that takes differences into account (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). After all, to paraphrase Ball and Cohen,

“The actual enacted curriculum in a classroom is jointly constructed by the teacher, the students, the instructional materials, and the particular context of that classroom” (Ball and Cohen, 1996).

When teachers are empowered and encouraged to adapt curriculum in response to the particular situation within their classroom, they are more likely to be successful than if they are expected to robotically deliver a curriculum or learning “strategies” that are advertised as being effective with all students (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Of course, teachers are almost certain to make adaptations even when they are expected to deliver curriculum to a script, and monitored for compliance (Datnow & Castellano, 2012). Furthermore, preventing teachers from adapting curriculum orients teachers towards focusing administrating a set procedure, limiting their capacity to grow their own teaching practice (Valencia, 2006). Instead, student and teacher growth is much more likely as a result of teachers organized into a collaborative community of practice, that empowers and professionalizes teachers as researchers in charge of school restructuring, and encourages teachers to continually grow in capacity and to learn new models of education (which they likely never experienced as students) and unlearn old models (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

This suggests that as a PLC crystallizes shared expectations around goals for student writing, it should simultaneously save space for the individual perspectives and needs of members. Ideally, the work of the PLC will not only engage in analysis of student work, but also in the actual used materials of teaching of the members of the PLC. “Looking closely at one’s own or someone else’s authentic work stimulates tremendous growth” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Teachers should be directly involved in co-constructing techniques and materials for instruction, and curriculum should serve the same goals for student achievement, but fit the different teaching style and teaching context of different members of the group. The PLC will be at its most effective when group members internalized the understanding that there are multiple approaches to arriving at a mutually shared goal, and individuals feel safe enough to surface concerns they have about an approach that a majority within the group coalesces around, but which they feel may not be effective for themselves (Hargreaves, 1991). As Ball and Cohen point out, there is a fit between our national culture of American individualism and the deeply held sense that the best teachers create their own instructional materials rather than “teaching to the text” (Ball & Cohen, 1996). A well-implemented PLC will harness that drive for teachers to identify themselves as highly-skilled and creative professionals, and will embrace teacher efforts to customize and individuate instruction (Chappuis, 2009).

But while encouraging this process of creative adaptation, how can schools ensure that the actual enacted curriculum reflects best practices and research about what techniques will effectively move student outcomes? While the PLC approach has increasingly become the consensus of research to create effective instruction, there are also challenges with purely site-based curriculum development efforts (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Corcoran, 2001). Some research suggests that the PD that produces the most gains was focused on expert knowledge from outside (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Site-based curriculum tends to emphasize on what works for the educators, and uses research to the extent that it confirms already familiar models (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Teachers often have limited capacity to analyze research-based trends in instructional practice (and the available research is often limited), and furthermore, found research much less persuasive than the testimonial of teachers viewed as successful (Corcoran, 2001). “School staff members paid lip service to research but in fact expressed more confidence in recommendations from other teacher. They found research hard to access and even harder to interpret, and they were ill prepared to sort out significant findings” (Corcoran, 2001). This suggests that a hybrid model may be most effective. PLCs should be supported with episodic interactions with experts, who can present research findings to the PLC members. A modified workshop model may be most useful, where PLC members can engage with an expert to create curriculum or instructional techniques that they can then pilot in their own classrooms, and determine whether or not the technique can authentically be integrated into their own classrooms.

Research-Based Strategies for Teacher Collaboration:

Research suggests that a strong PLC will have the following characteristics: *shared values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue* (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Multiple collaborative strategies and facilitation protocols to achieve these results are also available in literature:

Protocols for student work analysis – support shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, reflective dialogue

Some of the leading authorities in educational research extol the virtue of discussing work: “Looking closely at one’s own or someone else’s authentic work stimulates tremendous growth” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). This goes not only for the work of teachers, but also for student work. Analysis of student work to reveal trends in response to instruction and emerging needs can lead to improvements in student achievement, especially among vulnerable students (Goff, Colton & Langer, 2000). Colton and Langer piloted a portfolio process for looking at student writing, which selected students who represented different instructional challenges and then discussed samples of their writing over a period of several months. The protocol teachers used to reflect on student writing focused on linking the content of student work to the instructional context that produced it and then discuss pedagogical techniques to support improved outcomes (Goff, Colton & Langer, 2000).

Consultancy Protocols – supports collaboration, deprivatized practice, reflective dialogue

The Descriptive Consultancy protocol is a strategy developed by Nancy Mohr as a variation of a fundamental protocol developed at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (McDonald, J.P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A. & McDonald, E.C, 2007). The power of the descriptive consultancy is to support collaborative problem solving. In a descriptive consultancy protocol, an individual presents a problem of practice. The consultant (or consultants) then ask clarifying questions and probing questions before giving advice, if advice is given at all. The rationale for asking questions before giving advice is to encourage all parties to fully think through a problem before moving to strategies to resolve it, as well as to grow capacity on the part of all participants to develop the skill of asking good questions (McDonald, J.P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A. & McDonald, E.C, 2007).

Peer Observations – supports deprivatized practice, reflective dialogue

Peer observations can have the benefit of increasing the use of teaching strategies among those who observe each other’s classrooms, as well as building collegiality and reflective relationships. It can be best to avoid the dynamic of pairing a novice teacher with a veteran teacher, but instead to pair teachers of similar amounts of experience, in order to create a collaborative experience so that teachers are comfortable to have someone else enter their classroom (Hausen, 2010).

Lesson Tuning Protocols – focus on student learning, deprivatized practice, reflective dialogue

Another highly effective modality for the PLC is the lesson tuning protocol, a structured discussion of a teacher’s lesson or instructional strategy. Lesson tuning provides a way for teachers to discuss the objectives a teacher had in mind when they designed a lesson, the strategy they implemented to achieve those goals, and the outcome (McDonald, 2002). In a typical lesson tuning cycle, a teacher will present an instructional goal and a strategy or lesson they used to achieve it. They will also then describe how the lesson went, and anticipated and unanticipated student outcomes. Participants ask clarifying and probing questions with the goal of helping the presenting teacher to move their practice. In some variations of the lesson tuning protocol, the presenting teacher can then go back and revise their lesson to respond to these questions, and then pilot it again with students in an iterative process. The lesson tuning protocol has the benefit of both supporting the presenting teacher to grow their practice, as well as to help all participants co-construct understanding on instructional practices and strategies (McDonald, 2002).

Summary of Strategies to Support Teacher Collaboration –

Peer observations, lesson tuning, student work analysis, and teacher discussions of instructional material all have the benefit of deprivatizing teacher practice, which research suggests is beneficial to the creation of a highly effective school community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). They also have the benefit of focusing teacher reflection and discussion around the authentic work of both teachers and students, which research has also indicated to be of high value (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Current Instructional Strategies for Teaching Writing:

In addition to strategies to support teacher collaboration, as a part of this intervention, the researcher also reviewed literature surrounding existing practices for teaching writing. As stated earlier, the pedagogy of writing is in an emerging stage of development compared to literacy. Far fewer writing strategies than literacy strategies have support from empirical research, and many strategies are presented in the format of popular press teacher guides (Harris & Graham, 1996). Therefore, it can be difficult to assess which strategies for teaching writing are “tried and true” by the standard of being empirically-tested. Nevertheless, the following is a brief review of some prominent approaches in teaching writing.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development –

Self-regulated Strategy Development, or SRSD, is an approach to teaching writing pioneered and promoted by Steve Graham of Vanderbilt University (Harris &

Graham, 1996). In SRSD, students are explicitly taught strategies to accomplish specific writing tasks, like writing a story or developing a written persuasive argument. Simultaneously, they are also taught strategies for self-regulation like goal-setting, self-monitoring and self-reinforcement (Tracy, Reid & Graham, 2009). Examples of SRSD strategies would be teaching students the mnemonic of PLAN (Pay attention the prompt, List main ideas to develop your essay, Add supporting details, Number major points) and then have them both explicitly practice the strategy, as well as use the strategy as part of the writing process. SRSD is one of the very few approaches to teaching writing that has empirically-based results that seem to demonstrate improved effectiveness to “traditional-skills” approach, such as instruction focused on spelling and grammar (Tracy, Reid & Graham, 2009).

Templates and Writing Frames to teach Academic Argumentative Writing –

Another approach to teaching writing is to use sentence starters and writing frames as a means of both improving the skill of argumentative writing as well as teaching critical thinking. *They Say// Say* is a book by Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff that uses sentence frames as a means of explicitly teaching the key moves of argumentative writing. While their approach has not been empirically demonstrated to improve results, it was passed on to the researcher by a Stanford professor in charge of developing writing instruction for the Stanford Teacher Education Program. *They Say// Say* employs sentence frames as a means of supporting students to write the voice of others into their text, and to encourage students to think about how to synthesize multiple perspective and possibly opposing perspectives on an issue. For example:

My own view is that _____. Though I concede that _____, I still maintain that _____. For example, _____. Although some might object that _____, I reply that _____. The issue is important because _____.

As can be seen from the example, *They Say// Say* contains templates for framing arguments, counterarguments and middle arguments. It would seem to have exciting possibilities as a form of practicing logical interaction in the form of argumentative dialogue; an opportunity that might provide benefits to vulnerable sub-groups, like Long Term English Learners, that both need to improve their writing skills as well as need more verbal practice with academic English (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Structured Process Approach –

Another approach to teaching writing is the Structure Process Approach, which developing grew out of the work of George Hillocks, a pioneering teacher and Professor of Education at the University of Chicago. Engaged over the course of four decades in researching strategies for successfully teaching writing, he published highly influential articles and books. One of them, *What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis*

of Experimental Treatment Studies, was an early meta-analysis study that argued that the explicit teaching of grammar strategies was not effective in improving writing outcomes (Hillocks, 1984). Disciples of Hillocks, like Peter Smagorinsky, refined what is known as the Structured Process Approach, which is a student-centered and inquiry-based technique of teaching writing. The Structured Process Approach is founded on the idea that the “kids learn well when actively engaged with things that interest them” (Smagorinsky, 2010). It emphasizes teaching writing as a series of stages in which students engage in inquiry, as opposed to a formulaic process. It heavily depends on having students prepare for their writing through structured conversations, and it emphasizes contextualizing the writing task in the social experience of students. Sample tasks might involve comparing and contrasting two restaurant menus, or writing a letter to a friend to give advice on a particular topic. Although the Structure-Process Approach also does not advertise being supported by empirical studies in the same way as the SRSD approach, it also was referred to the researcher by a Stanford STEP professor, Jeremy Glazer.

Conclusion and Intervention Plan:

Ultimately, the research suggests that the goal of improving student outcomes in writing will be best supported not by a one-time instructional shift, but by the creation of an ongoing and sustained professional learning community that engages in reflective dialogue and inquiry (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). The research also supports that the most effective structure for this PLC will be one that maximizes authentic teacher autonomy over the inquiry process, but still supports the development of the following characteristics: shared instructional practice, a deprivatized instructional environment, and effective exposure to expert ideas from outside the community of practice (Hargreaves, 1991; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Corcoran, 2001).

These overall goals led the researcher to design the following intervention arc for an AMPUHS Writing PLC:

- 1.) *Create an understanding of optimal expectations for student work in writing – Student Work Analysis***
 - 2.) *Assess and construct group understanding about the gap between our student outcomes and those expectations – Student Work Analysis***
- and then**
- 3.) *Engage in a continuing process of improving and refining instructional techniques around achieving those goals by – Lesson Tuning Protocols***

4.) Constructing a shared vision of what is effective in writing instruction and engaging in reflective dialogue – Peer Observations

5.) Creating, sharing, and reflecting on instructional materials and techniques that align with that developing vision – Consultancy Protocols in Instructional Strategies & Workshops around Research-Based High Impact Practices

The planned intervention tries to first create shared values and goals for PLC participants by having them engage in the analysis of AMPUHS student writing, so they can internalize the data of the achievement gap in writing. The planned intervention contains structures for PLC participants to both compare AMPUHS student writing to models of “College-Ready Writing” and then to also look at trends in AMPUHS student writing over different grade levels and student proficiency levels. Again, the object of this cycle of student work analysis is to have PLC participants internalize data about the Problem of Practice – how the current strategies employed to teach writing at AMPUHS are not sufficient to generate college-ready writers over the span of four years.

The intervention plan then shifts the PLC into an iterative process of generating instructional material, tuning the material with other participants, piloting strategies in classrooms, engaging in peer-observations to share instructional practice, and then returning to reflective conversations in the PLC group on how these instructional strategies enact in the classroom to create student outcomes. Under the intervention plan, participants would choose a challenging aspect of teaching writing to target, and then use consultancies to develop strategies to move student outcomes on that target. Moving through the iterative process, the PLC would both develop instructional materials as concrete takeaways, and also develop a common model of teaching writing, as participants shared and reflected on which of these instructional materials were effective. Throughout the course of the intervention, the research would plan to have periodic PLC workshops on research-based practices like SRSD and the Structured Process approach, with the goal of allowing PLC participants to be exposed to outside expert knowledge in addition to their own group practice.

While the planned intervention is ambitious and contains multiple levels of moving parts, this arc has the benefit of being supported by research in each of its components, and being designed to build both awareness and capacity within participants.

Theory of Action

Problem of Practice	Literature Review	Intervention	Literature Review	Expected Outcome	Research Methods/ Data Collection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers at A More Perfect Union High School do not consistently and effectively implement instructional techniques aligned with a common model of teaching writing • The majority of AMPUHS students are not college ready in writing by the time of graduation. • Students who enter college at a remedial writing level have low statistical chances of persisting to graduation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly effective teachers using highly effective strategies to teach writing can bridge the achievement gap in writing • Teachers are more likely to be effective if they have a common model of teaching writing • Teachers can collaborate to improve effectiveness and develop curriculum as a professional learning community (PLC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers will be engaged in a high-autonomy PLC with to create a common model of teaching writing and improve teacher effectiveness in teaching writing • Teachers will evaluate the achievement gap in AMPUHS student writing and develop strategies to address the achievement gap • Teachers will use lesson-tuning, peer-observation, and consultancy protocols to share problems of practice and co-construct a model of instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A PLC is more likely to be effective if it has high relational trust, a shared vision of instruction, and effective protocols to enhance collaboration • Teachers are more likely to engage with provided curriculum if they feel autonomous and empowered in choosing which instructional techniques to employ in pursuit of their instructional vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through teacher collaboration in the PLC, a shared vision of instruction will emerge that all participants will be involved and invested in • Use of high quality instructional materials that are shared and consistently implemented will improve teacher effectiveness in teaching writing • Improved teacher effectiveness will lead to improved student outcomes in writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and post surveys with teachers • Teacher interviews before and after intervention • Survey of existing instructional materials and frequency of use • Survey of instructional materials created and frequency of use • Classroom observations • Video of collaborative time • Surveys/analysis of student output and student survey data

Intervention Action Plan

Component		Activities	Purpose/Question to be answered	Data to be Collected	Type of Data (process v. impact)
Pre-Intervention Phase	1	<p>Pre Intervention Survey and Interview</p> <p>Interview Teachers on Existing Teacher Practices around Writing Instruction, Collaborative Style, Goals for Students, Training in Writing</p> <p>Survey Teachers on Instructional Materials used for Writing, Formats of Writing Instruction, Form of Writing Instruction</p>	<p>Identify teacher's practices and beliefs around writing instruction and begin to surface internal teacher goals for collaboration</p>	<p>-Teacher Interview -Survey response</p>	<p>Impact - establish baseline of teacher practice around writing instruction -establish baseline of teacher training around writing -establish baseline of coherency around writing</p> <p>Process – collaboration goals and style will inform future practice</p>
	2	<p>Researcher Observes</p> <p>Researcher Observes Writing Lessons – Focusing on Teacher Actions, Materials Used, Student</p>	<p>Collect baseline data on</p>	<p>-Observation data</p>	<p>Impact – establish</p>

	2	Researcher Observes Writing Lessons – Inquiry Debrief with Teachers	<p>Researcher Observes Writing Lessons – Focusing on Teacher Actions, Materials Used, Student Outcomes</p> <p>Researcher Debriefs Observations with Teachers</p>	Collect baseline data on instructional practices, instructional materials, and student responses	<p>-Observation data</p> <p>-Video data of observation</p> <p>-Video data of coaching sessions</p>	<p>Impact – establish baseline of teacher practice and student response</p> <p>Process – Collaborative meetings with teachers</p>
vention Phase	3	Meeting 1	Establish collaborative norms, build consensus around group goals and articulate specific goals, set sequence for following meetings, present research-informed options for PLC topics	Built trust, group rapport, working protocols, invest group with autonomy	<p>-Meeting notes</p> <p>-Reflective journal</p> <p>-Exit tickets via Google Forms</p>	<p>Impact – baseline of group goals and functioning</p> <p>Process – exit tickets</p>
		Meeting 2	Crystallize shared expectations around goals for student writing. Analyze selected AMPUHS student writing at a variety of skilled levels. Compare AMPUHS student writing to exemplar “college-ready” writing	Arrive at shared understanding of expectations for student writing, and the gap between expectations for student writing and actual	<p>-Meeting notes</p> <p>-Reflective journal</p> <p>-Exit tickets via Google Forms</p>	<p>Impact – baseline of expectations for student work and perception of gap</p> <p>Process – exit tickets,</p>

	4	Biweekly PLC Meetings	Based upon teacher input, meeting topics could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher practice in model student argument writing tasks - Teachers self-diagnose on instructional style and discuss strengths and challenges - Tuning protocol cycle with peer observation and student work analysis - Expert-led workshops on writing instruction and discussion of research on best practices in writing instruction - Creation of tools and instructional materials supporting writing instruction 	Co-construct instructional vision, practice, and coherence around writing instruction	-Meeting notes -Reflective journal -Exit tickets via Google Forms	Impact – meeting notes Process – reflective journal, exit tickets
Post-Intervention Phase	5	Researcher Observes Writing Lessons – Inquiry Debrief with Teachers	Researcher Observes Writing Lessons – Focusing on Teacher Actions, Materials Used, Student Outcomes Researcher Debriefs Observations with Teachers	Collect impact data on instructional practices, instructional materials, and student responses	-Observation data -Video data of observation -Video data of coaching	Impact – establish baseline of teacher practice and student response
	6	Post-Intervention Survey and Interview	Interview Teachers on Existing Teacher Practices around Writing Instruction, Collaborative Style, Goals for Students, Training in Writing Survey Teachers on Instructional Materials used for Writing, Formats of Writing Instruction	Identify teacher's practices and beliefs around writing instruction	-Interview notes -Survey response	Impact – measure post-intervention teacher practice

Description of Intervention:

The literature reviewed for this intervention suggested that autonomous, authentic teacher collaboration and reflection would be the most effective and enduring pathway to improving curriculum and student outcomes on writing. The intervention was carefully designed to maximize teacher autonomy while supporting them in growing awareness and capacity around teaching writing and addressing my Problem of Practice: the lack of a common model of teaching writing at AMPUHS, and the failure of AMPUHS to generate college-readiness among its graduates.

I had broadly conceived of an arc moving in the following sequence:

1. analysis of student work to assess achievement gaps between actual work and college ready work,
2. targeting and collaboratively planning interventions to address the gaps which emerged
3. engaging in lesson-tuning and peer-observations to use reflection on these interventions to build instructional coherence among teachers around ways of teaching writing

As my intervention moved from the theoretical to the actual, adjustments necessarily took place. Some of these adjustments reflected changes made to better reflect the autonomous and authentic goals of the PLC participants, as their discussions of teaching writing evolved. Some adjustments also took place due to time constraints, the researcher's impacted schedule, and subtle teacher pushback against portions of the intervention plan that made them feel uncomfortable: peer observations. It is the belief of the researcher that all of these factors become an integral part of the enacted intervention and useful material for analysis as part of the Action Research.

As stated before, we began our intervention with a discussion rooted in student work analysis, as is supported by research (Goff, Colton & Langer, 2000). Since the stated goal of the PLC was to support all AMPUHS students in achieving college ready writing by senior year, we began by analyzing the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium's rubric for student argumentative writing, along with released samples of student writing ranked at various levels by the SBAC. A more detailed analysis of the conversations that emerged as part of this work will follow in my discussion of the implementation and impact data of this intervention. Briefly, discussion of the SBAC rubric and graded work surfaced the realization that the fundamental task our students were being assessed on was writing a persuasive argument. Teacher feedback after the first and second PLC meetings advocated heavily for engaging in further discussion of the format and structure of argumentative writing prompts and how they elicited different ranges of student responses.

This began our first major divergence with the intervention as planned and as enacted. At the end of analyzing student work, I had planned that we would create a list of achievement gaps to target for instructional intervention. However, instead of

generating a targeted list of surface areas to remediate, dialogue about student writing surfaced a desire to deeply engage and reflect on core issues with writing across grade levels. The following themes emerged:

1. The ways certain kinds of writing prompts (stimuli) prompted writing from different profiles of students
2. Instructional approaches and materials oriented towards scaffolding student approaches to multi-paragraph essays
3. Zeroing in on the core task of analysis: the component of writing which explains how a given piece of evidence supports a given argument

As these themes unfolded, the arc of the intervention shifted to the following sequence:

Meeting #1: Analysis of the SBAC rubric for argumentative writing. Teachers then calibrated their grading by doing “blind” grading of unmarked student writing that had been released by SBAC as representative samples different levels of student writing.

Meeting #2: Analysis of AMPUHS student writing. Participants chose writing samples that were representative of “high” “mid” and “low” proficiency writing from each grade level were reviewed and discussed. Participants looked for trends in growth or lack of growth from year to year and for trends within achievement categories.

Meeting #3: Analysis of writing prompts used by teachers at different grade levels and in different content areas. Prompts were compared to the rigor and cognitive challenge of SBAC prompts. Participants looked for trends in how complexity and rigor increased from grade level to grade level and how scaffolding was added or removed.

Meeting #4: Analysis of a set of widely-used graphic organizers used to support students in writing essays in the 5-paragraph format.

Meeting #5: Discussion of teacher conceptions of the element of “analysis” in student writing. “Analysis” was discussed as different teachers in different genres of writing used the term. Instructional material used by a teacher to teach analysis was reviewed and discussed.

Meeting #6: Review and discussion of instructional material used by a teacher to help students link pieces of evidence to support a thesis and related topic sentences.

This revision of the intervention plan honored the autonomy of the PLC and the requests of participants to be empowered in the way in which they engaged in the task of inquiry into effectively teaching writing. A detailed analysis of the outcomes of the revised plan will follow in the Data Analysis section of this paper. However, broadly, we can state that this revised intervention plan resulted in both benefits and costs for the project of improving teaching writing at AMPUHS. One benefit was that the expansion of teacher reflective dialogue added more opportunities for participants to co-construct a common model of teaching writing, by having detailed and progressive conversations about the challenges AMPUHS students face in developing as writers. Another benefit was that the revised plan allowed teachers to share their practice, by looking at instructional materials from the classrooms of all participants, as well as student writing from all participants.

However, the revised intervention was weak in giving participants opportunities to share practice in other, important ways. Since no peer observations took place, participants did not have the opportunity to enter the actual classroom space of their peers, and see how their peer teachers interacted and enacted curriculum in their classrooms with their students. The revised intervention was also weak in creating opportunities for participants to use the feedback of their peer teachers to develop improved instructional strategies. Since no lesson-tuning protocols took place, or even development of new instructional strategies, this crucial aspect of building the capacity of participants was removed from the scope of the interventions. Finally, and perhaps most unfortunately, these same factors meant that the intervention did not produce concrete takeaways for AMPUHS. Participants in the intervention did not develop any new techniques for teaching writing, nor did they develop specific documents or agreements to determine how writing should be taught. Instead, all of the work to build common model of instruction was contained within the conversations and memories of the PLC participants.

Research Methods:

Implementation and impact data was triangulated from the following sources: pre and post intervention surveys of teachers, transcripts of intervention meetings, exit tickets from selected interventions, and observations of participants teaching writing prior to the beginning of the intervention.

The preponderance of both impact and implementation data came from the transcripts of the intervention meetings, which were coded, analyzed, and sorted. The following codes were used to analyze teacher discussions through the lens of different themes and patterns:

- Subject matter of discussion by areas of challenge and concern for student writers – analysis, formal logic of arguments, academic language and abstraction, benefits and costs of scaffolding, and the “core idea” of writing.
 - *Codes used: ANA, LOG, ABR, SCA, CORE*
- Subject matter of discussion – procedural and socialization versus discussion of curriculum, teacher exposition about curriculum versus co-constructing knowledge about curriculum
 - *Codes used: PROSOC, CURR, EXPO, INS*
- Tone of content – discussion of student deficits or curriculum deficits versus student growth or curriculum growth
 - *Codes used: SDT, CDT, SGT, CGT*
- Frequency of participation by “dominating” versus “quiet” teachers.
 - *Codes used: TD, QT*

Due to the quantity and quality of transcription data (over six hours of meeting time was transcribed and accurate transcription could not always be achieved when teachers were working in two groups simultaneously), meetings were reviewed for usable content first, and then coded. These coded comments were then organized by categories, reviewed again and sorted again.

Once the teacher comments had been transcribed and labeled with codes, the coded comments were organized into several different schemas. Comments that co-constructed knowledge were sorted by whether or not they used growth language or deficit language and whether or not they were made by a “dominating” teacher versus a “quiet” teacher. Comments made by “dominating” versus “quiet” teachers were also sorted to determine whether or not there were trends in the frequency of growth language versus deficit language and in the frequency of on-topic discussion of curriculum versus socialization and procedural discussions. Additionally, comments were sorted into different areas of concern about student writing, and then the overall frequency that each area of concern occurred in the discussions was recorded.

Data Analysis and Findings:

Introduction

Analysis of impact and implementation data shows that important shared understandings were surfaced and consolidated during the course of the intervention. Post-intervention survey data shows that teachers felt enthusiastic about the intervention, and felt high degrees of confidence about continued reflection around writing instruction. However, no codified and universally adopted common model of instruction was produced as an end product of the intervention. Nor were there concrete takeaways in terms of the creation of new instructional materials or the sharing of instructional strategies. Thus, since the problem of practice that this intervention was designed to address was the creation of a common model of teaching writing and improved teacher effectiveness in teaching writing, progress towards these outcomes was ambiguous at best.

However, while this intervention did not fully achieve its intended outcome, substantial progress was still made. As teachers discussed curriculum in the framework of an arc of PLC meetings, detailed discussion and analysis of writing instruction at AMPUHS took place. Reviewing and sifting through the transcripts of these conversations reveals considerable information about how writing is taught, what perceived challenges are, how the curriculum as enacted by teachers interacts with those challenges, and what are viewed as the most necessary avenues for improvement.

Impact Data and Overview:

Analysis of Pre and Post Intervention Survey Data

Information about the effective impact of this intervention was inferred from comparing two main data points: a pre-intervention survey and a post-intervention survey. The pre-intervention survey confirmed that participants in this intervention reflected a trend in teacher preparation reported in literature: 80% of teachers surveyed felt they received an inadequate amount of training to teach writing in their teacher credentialing program (Kiuahara, 2009). However, this lack of training did not come through in their self-reporting on how adequate they currently felt in teaching writing – 80% again reported that they felt adequate in teaching writing. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers (60%) reported that they had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of writing instruction at AMPUHS and 40% stated that they felt that AMPUHS did not have an effective and common model of teaching writing. This data reveals that a substantial portion of the participants did not feel that AMPUHS had a fully effective approach to teaching writing prior to the beginning of the intervention. It is also notable that the two participants who had greater experience, and were probably more

comfortable in surfacing deficits at AMPUHS, were the two who reported that AMPUHS did not have an effective model of teaching writing.

Judging solely from the basis of the post-intervention survey of participants, the intervention was highly effective. In their post-intervention survey responses, participants indicated that they felt that the PLC was highly effective: 75% of responders rated the PLC as effective and 25% as very effective. Furthermore, 100% of responders stated that they either felt confident (50%) or very confident (50%) about possibilities for continuing reflection and dialogue about writing instruction at AMPUHS. Participants stated that they liked being able to deeply discuss writing curriculum with other teachers engaged in similar work. They also stated that they greatly enjoyed having the autonomy to set the course of the conversation, and to discuss the specific areas of challenge that they felt were most important.

To quote one participant:

“The format of our PLC meetings, in which we established a goal for understanding, read over student work, and then went over our thoughts and conclusions about their writing was successful in allowing us to see the specific areas of growth for our students, and to be able to talk about how we can each target that area in our own classes.”

Another teacher stated:

“Loved the PLC group. One of the PD highlights. Loved to discuss concrete materials with staff. Would have loved to start earlier.”

On the basis of this feedback, one might judge the intervention to have been successful. However, the Problem of Practice as stated was to create a common model of instruction and to improve effectiveness of teachers teaching writing. The modifications imposed on the intervention due to time constraints and teacher feedback meant that the PLC did not produce as concrete takeaways either instructional materials or documents containing a consensus around a common model of teaching. Also, due to time constraints, post-intervention data on teacher effectiveness in teaching writing was not collected. Therefore, there is no quantitative data that would provide quantitative evidence of improved teacher effectiveness from either observations of teachers, surveys of students, or analysis of the written work of students after the intervention.

Furthermore, while 75% of responders to the post-intervention survey felt neutral or positive about whether or not AMPUHS had a common model of instruction in writing (3 or 4 on a 5 point scale), 60% of responders gave the same evaluation on the pre-intervention survey. This means that the intervention did not shift participant confidence in whether or not AMPUHS had an effective and common model of teaching writing. The majority of participants already felt generally positive. Also, participants may not fully have understood what it means to have a common model of instruction, as this topic did not fully surface in the intervention. While 100% of responders to the post-intervention survey rated themselves as somewhat confident or confident about their own ability to

give writing instruction, there was only minimal shift from the pre-intervention survey where 100% had already rated themselves as at least somewhat confident about teaching writing (one responder rated themselves as having moved from somewhat to very confident).

Once again, the revised intervention did not obtain data that would allow for a quantitative assessment of student writing in the classrooms of the participants, either before or after the intervention. Therefore, there is no objective data that could confirm or disconfirm the participant teacher's positive self-evaluations of their effectiveness in teaching writing. Indeed, there is the possibility of a lack of calibration between the participant teachers self-evaluation and their actual effectiveness, since 100% of teacher participants rated themselves as being either somewhat confident or confident in teaching writing while only 30% of AMPUHS 11th graders met college-ready standards of writing on the SBAC.

There is also the substantial likelihood of a positive reporting bias among participants as they responded to both the pre and post intervention surveys. Since the intervention was being organized and conducted by a person with positional authority over them, participants may have felt the need to be more positive in their feedback than they actually felt.

Nevertheless, the research seems to indicate that schools are more successful when teachers feel that they are professionals who are empowered to make decisions about how best to enact curriculum and who are dedicated to improving curriculum by discussing and reflecting on it (Louis & Marks, 1996). Therefore, the data that teachers felt positive both about the intervention and the opportunity to do further work on writing is an achievement that has some value in and of itself. It is to be hoped that the positive sentiment laid down in the first intervention will prove to be the groundwork for further work that will yield concrete positive outcomes.

Impact Data: Analysis of PLC Transcripts

Since pre and post intervention survey results reveals mixed and inconclusive data on intervention effectiveness, it is necessary to turn to another source of data to look for impact of the intervention. A large amount of qualitative and quantitative evidence concerning participant's shifting views about teaching writing comes from analysis of transcripts of the PLC sessions. Reviewing this rich data source both sequentially and by category uncovered a wealth of information from teachers of varying lengths of experience speaking relatively candidly and honestly about the problem of practice: teaching students how to write.

A central theme that emerged was related to content and task: surfacing and clarifying what was most difficult about teaching students argumentative writing and distilling these into specific areas of concern. This theme emerged without prompting

over the course of the action research, by the autonomous movement of the group of teachers as they engaged in the process. Cultural biases and pedagogical assumptions also surfaced over the course of the process, and the conversations sometimes became heavily weighted with deficit language about both student writing and curriculum, as well as cultural assumptions about the home and family lives of AMPUHS students.

Impact Data: Participant Discussion of the SBAC Rubric for Writing

The intervention arc began with PLC participants entering into a discussion of the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium rubric, as a credible and authoritative external standard of college-ready writing. Participant discussion focused around breaking down the language of the rubric and finding concrete examples of what college ready meant in student writing samples that had been graded and released by the SBAC.

Participants noted that the SBAC rubric has two main strands: organization and elaboration. Indicators on the organization strand are characterized by an emphasis on overall consistency and coherency of writing around the topic of the prompt. The elaboration strand calls for students to finding adequate evidence to address an issue and then successfully using the evidence to support an argument taking a position on the issue.

One participant said:

“I’ll just tell you what I’m struck by is there are two big strands. One of them seems to be structure, and from structure, the key words I get is unity and coherence. Structure has a sense of AMPUHS and coherence. Then the second strand, evidence and elaboration, I see that as reasoning and the emphasis on reasoning is it being thorough and convincing.”

The third strand, written conventions, is weighed less heavily than the other two strands and is evaluated by whether or not the density or errors obscures the writer’s message.

“So it’s like even if there were errors, as long as the errors don’t overwhelm the meaning, it’s okay to have some errors.”

While this would seem to suggest that written conventions are less important than the other strands, since they are assigned a smaller weight in the scoring rubric, participants discussed how this could be a misleading assumption. Participants felt that academic language and conventions had an underlying importance that was not immediately obvious from its weight in SBAC rubric.

One participant stated:

“So, to me, a huge barrier to our students making good arguments is their diminished vocabulary. They kind of have the idea, but they really struggle with putting it down, especially

when they're trying to be academic. So it's kind of hard for me to divorce conventions from the overall challenge of academic writing.”

Participants would return over the course of the intervention to reflect on the issue of proficiency with academic language and dealing with abstraction as a crucial bottleneck to student writing.

Overall participants felt that the critical indicators of a score of college-ready were as follows. My researcher journal contained the following participant consensus on what was required from students to demonstrate college-readiness on the SBAC:

- 1) accurately processing the prompt and making sense of the question that was asked
- 2) generating an adequate response that represented a coherent point of view
- 3) marshaling evidence from the sources given to support that point of view.

Participant comments showed that they felt this standard of college-readiness writing could be viewed as a low bar that did not push beyond surface analysis of issues and did not effectively deal with concerns of perspective and bias.

One participant said:

“So the student, to me, in terms of the structure, he was just kind of checking all the boxes, right? Clearly, this is a very simplistic format where it's like you have your evidence on the side, and then there's a little conclusion. This is emblematic of fact that it's a timed test. They have a lot to do in a short amount of time. So he checked all the boxes off.”

Another participant stated:

“Even if they're using sources, they seem super biased, and the student had limited knowledge that there might be a bias in the sources at all.”

While participants acknowledged that the writing of AMPUHS seniors still did not measure up to this standard, they held out hope that ultimately they could achieve at an even higher level. The data showed that participants felt that teachers should push AMPUHS students to fully engage in perspectives different from their own, understand the context of an argument, and make an effort to actually persuade someone with a viewpoint different than their own.

One illustrative participant exchange went as follows:

Teacher A: “They have a lot of trouble moving beyond that and going in deeper and really looking, like, ‘Is that substantiated – or are you just making a bunch of claims? You're saying this is evidence, but is it proving what you're saying?’ This writer struggles with that, and then to say that this is a four [exceeded proficiency], kind of makes me feel that for SBAC, they're setting up that it's more about structure.”

Teacher B: “Structure. Form over function.”

Teacher A: “Definitely. I mean when I was grading them when we were doing the interim assessment, you can see how it probably is for the SBAC graders when you're like, ‘Oh my gosh. This one sounds decent. Okay, yeah, fine. Had all the pieces, good.’ So I just think to take the scores with a grain of salt when we're looking at them. Is this the ultimate goal for our kids? I think we want ultimately a more robust analysis.

Teacher A again summed up the issue with the following statement:

“In terms of structure and word choice, I can't imagine my kids surpassing this because definitely a lot of them are behind. In terms of the argument, I think we can push them further and the reasoning further than this one goes.”

Discussion and review of the SBAC rubric was highly informative and impactful for the PLC. It caused participants to internalize data about an external standard which would be used to judge the success of AMPUHS students. However, participants uncovered tensions and contradictions within the framework of the SBAC rubric. Participants acknowledged that the SBAC rubric primarily valued two strands that focused on structure and elaboration, and formally stated that conventions were less heavily weighted. Nevertheless, participants had concerns that, ultimately, student proficiency in academic language use and conventions was highly determinative of their ability to effectively engage in the SBAC task, regardless of the formal weight given to academic language and conventions in the language of the rubric. Participants also surfaced concerns that the “standardized” way in which SBAC essays were graded could create a low bar for achievement. Relating the task of grading SBAC essays to an interim assessment exercise conducted at AMPUHS, participants noted that it was possible for an essay grader to become numbed by the task of grading hundreds of essays. Therefore, rather than looking to see if an argumentative essay was genuinely persuasive, a grader might look for some of the superficial structures of academic argument writing, measure the overall proficiency of language use, and then assign a grade of college-ready to an essay that only engaged a prompt at a superficial level. Participants called for AMPUHS students to have goals of exceeding that low bar, while simultaneously acknowledging that a present-time, most AMPUHS students still fell short.

Impact Data: Trends in Student Growth and Persistent Challenges

In the next intervention meeting, the AMPUHS Writing PLC shifted to looking at representative samples of AMPUHS student writing from 9th to 12th grade, with a special focus on both the trends in development and critical areas of deficit or challenge. Teacher discussion in grade level loops arrived at a consensus about the developmental cycle of AMPUHS students, which was recorded in the researcher's journal:

9th grade – students respond robotically and procedurally to a prompt, completing one element of the task at a time

10th grade – students are emerging an understanding of the prompt as a coherent idea but many are still struggling

11th grade – students are gaining proficiency at responding to the prompt as a concept or position on an issue, which they respond with their own personal position

12th grade – students have gained proficiency with more basic prompts, but are struggling with more advanced prompts that require more sophisticated academic language and abstract reasoning

It was out of this meeting where they looked at overall trends in AMPUHS student writing that teacher requests began to focus the PLC on diving more deeply into particular student challenges in writing, as opposed to begin creating instructional materials to target achievement gaps that participants felt they still did not fully understand.

One participant stated:

“I feel like we’re rushing. We still haven’t fully understood and discussed how it is that students struggle with analysis. We’re not ready yet to try to develop instructional strategies because we don’t fully understand the problem.”

Observation of this kind of participant feedback persuaded the researcher to revise the intervention from the originally planned sequence of lesson-tuning and peer observations, and to instead allow the feedback of PLC participants to set the course and agenda of the following meetings. These subsequent meetings then began an iterative process of investigating and discussing specific areas where AMPUHS students struggled in writing, and the effectiveness of existing teacher efforts to address those challenges, as opposed to developing new curriculum.

Impact Data: Persistent Challenges for Student Writing and Areas of Concern

As the AMPUHS Writing PLC progressed through this cycle of examining student challenges in writing, analysis of the PLC transcripts shows that the following aspects of writing pedagogy emerged as key areas related to persistent challenges for students:

ANA – Analysis – 30% of teacher comments about curriculum

CORE – Writing as Communications of Ideas – 19%

LOG – Student use of Formal Logic – 19%

SCA – Benefits and Drawbacks of Scaffolding – 19%

ABR – Academic Language and Abstract Reasoning – 13%

Area of Concern #1: ANA – Analysis – 30% of comments

Persistently dominating teacher concerns about student writing were comments that centered around the term “analysis”. Participants repeatedly identified “analysis” as the area that was most challenging for students, yet even how to properly define “analysis” was initially a struggle.

One participant confessed:

“When we talk about analysis I feel like I'm a bit shaky on it. Sometimes I just throw out that word and I don't really like break it down enough for the students.”

One teacher thought of analysis as “elaboration” – the “so what” portion after a piece of evidence was introduced. Another participant thought of analysis as similar to finding patterns or solving a puzzle. Nevertheless, despite differing definitions of the term, there was consensus that analysis was very challenging to teach to students. Student deficit language crept into the language of this participant as they expressed their frustration.

The teacher stated:

“So this is the number one problem that we identified. [In] my opinion we all don't have the same definition of analysis, and I think we're all talking about how their analysis sucks. And I think we all haven't had a conversation about what we actually mean by analysis.”

Discussion of analysis also surfaced teacher narratives about how certain forms of reasoning are often rarely explicitly taught, but instead are inherited as part of family culture.

An AMPUHS instructional leader who visited the PLC for the discussion of analysis said:

“I don't think I ever had a teacher teach me analysis, but I knew kind of instinctually how to do it, and I think thinking back, I think it's because my dad was a professor, and he was always someone who liked to debate and argue. So he was constantly debating with me about things. Because I had that model in my mind, it's not just saying here is my evidence. It's saying here is my evidence, and this is why I'm right, that I have that mental model.”

One participant talked about how analysis functions to make implicit knowledge or assumptions that the author has about evidence in an argument more explicit to the reader:

“The students say ‘Oh, you know. You know how it's better, if you get better jobs,’ but I'm like, ‘Yeah, but you have to tell me because I don't know that you know that.’”

Ultimately, participants came to an agreement for a working definition of “analysis” as distinct from “warrant” that was recorded in the researcher's journal:

“Analysis” is a close reading of the evidence that explains the significance of the evidence before the “warrant” explains how the evidence supports the author’s argument

Participant discussion of “Analysis” linked this Area of Concern back to the Problem of Practice: failure of AMPUHS to help students achieve college-ready proficiency in writing by time of graduation. The SBAC rubric identifies “Elaboration” as a key strand of college-ready writing.

As one participant stated:

“Then the second strand, evidence and elaboration, I see that is reasoning and emphasis on reasoning is it being thorough and convincing.”

The challenge of teaching “Analysis” seems to be at the core of students being able to write reasoning that is thorough. “Analysis” is the matrix through which reasoning is expressed in writing, filling the space between the statement of claims and the evidence used to support them. Without quality analysis, writing is reduced to outlines and bullet points, which may contain the skeleton of a functioning argument, but lack the meat to persuade a reader of the author’s position.

Area of Concern #2: LOG - The Chain of Formal Logic – Claim, Evidence, Warrant -- 19% of comments

19% of participant comments about curriculum concerned the challenge of teaching students the correct use of formal logic to support arguments. The researcher’s journal recorded the following consensus arrived at by participants:

There is a persistent challenge for AMPUHS students in differentiating between key elements of the formal logical structure of Claim, Evidence, and Warrant.

Claim: an assertion of truth

Evidence: information indicating whether a proposition is true

Warrant: the logical connection between the evidence and the claim

A typical example of a claim might be a topic sentence in a persuasive essay. Participants observed that students could work intensely to generate topic sentences and then invest great effort in finding pieces of evidence they could link to those topic sentences. However, students often struggled with the warrant – matching their evidence to their argument and making explicit how the evidence supports their argument.

One participant noted:

“They spend a lot of time like picking out evidence or like ‘This is my topic sentence’ and then when it comes to like connecting the two they just like, ‘No, I’m already done.’”

The challenge of understanding and employing this formal reasoning technique persisted as students progressed to higher grade levels and as cognitive complexity increased.

Another participant stated:

“Even with the seniors this year, using multiple pieces of evidence still seems very difficult.”

To summarize, participants noted that while there were some challenges at early grade levels in understanding fundamental structures like topic sentences, students relatively quickly progressed to an understanding the fundamental concept of evidence. Once the internalized the idea of evidence, students could engage in rigorous and exhaustive searches through texts for evidence to support claims. However, when they were engaged in the task of explaining the logical connection between a given piece of evidence and a given claim, students struggled. Even as they began to experience moderate success in the practice of formal logic in upper grade levels, progressive levels of rigor would undermine that success. For example, students might approach mastery of using warrants with single pieces of evidence but then struggle with the task of integrating multiple pieces of evidence to support a single claim. The fundamental concept of the “warrant” as a critical part of the formal logic of argumentation seemed to require frequent re-teaching and multiple pedagogical approaches in order to enable students to achieve mastery.

Area of Concern #3: SCA - Benefits and Drawbacks of Scaffolding – 19%

In one meeting, the PLC reviewed and analyzed a set of graphic organizers that had been widely used at AMPUHS for a lengthy period of time to teach students how to generate and organize a 5-paragraph essay. The graphic organizers feature one worksheet for each paragraph of the essay and essentially give students a step-by-step guide to generating each paragraph from component parts.

The graphic organizers, created by a founding English teacher at the school, had been popular for a long period of time due to their effectiveness in getting students started in the basics of writing an essay. However, the PLC was unanimous in recognizing the concern that scaffolds could cause students to internalize a procedural approach to writing that was ultimately superficial.

One participant stated:

“I tend to think kids kind of cling to what they learn in ninth and tenth grade as like the format and they’re kind of struggling to have it evolve.”

One comment of particular interest came from a teacher who was an alumni of AMPUHS, and who had first learned how to write an academic essay by using the graphic organizers.

“And then I think it was my third year of college, I took a class on writing and it was like basically the premise of the class was that this whole structure was incorrect in terms of writing, because no one really like is supposed to write in a five-paragraph structure.”

However, participants also recognized that the graphic organizers were necessary for students to internalize basic forms of writing before they could move beyond them.

“I think that because we're older we're like, "Oh, in college, blah blah blah," but then if you think about all the writing that they have to do right now to get to college and that first year, it's usually five paragraph essays so I think this kind of meets them more at where they are now.”

To summarize, while participants broadly agreed that scaffolding is necessary to teach emerging students the complex task of writing, they also broadly agreed on implicit dangers of scaffolding. This danger is that by breaking down the process of writing into a series of micro-tasks, scaffolds tend to cause students to understand writing an essay procedurally and from a lens of work completion. A heavily-scaffolded writing assignment can be experienced by students as a series of worksheets, which they complete, and then engage in the culminating activity of mechanically typing up the contents of those worksheets. This inhibits students from understanding writing as a process by which a number of related ideas are developed into a unified, logically-consistent whole. Furthermore, when writing is understood procedurally, students may not apprehend that there are times when conventions can be bent or broken completely to accomplish the underlying goal of effective communication of a particular idea.

In order to successfully develop students through the journey from emerging to accomplished writer, teachers must engage in a complex dance of introducing and removing scaffolds.

Area of Concern #4: ABR – Academic Language and Abstract Reasoning – 13%

Many PLC comments also focused on how students struggled with processing and articulating abstract arguments, especially as levels of abstraction increased. Proficiency with academic language and even language conventions play a role in these challenges, when complex language, preposition and pronoun use become a barrier to accurately talking about abstract concepts.

One teacher said:

“They really struggle with using the right word choice, and sometimes the smallest – the way they use the wrong preposition, which to me is kind of a convention issue. But then sometimes they choose something that isn't quite what they mean.”

To summarize, academic language and the problem of abstraction is a challenging barrier to student achievement in writing. It is also a barrier can prove very resistant to instruction, as proper use of academic language and conventions are often learned intuitively and imitatively by repeatedly engaging with academic texts of high complexity. Explicit instruction on complex technical aspects of grammar can be both low engagement and ineffective. The discussion of PLC participants on this area of concern asserted the fundamental value of building effective engagement of students in reading more and more complex texts – and simultaneously enabling students to see these complex texts as relevant to their own lived experience.

Area of Concern #5: CORE – Understanding Writing as Communication of Ideas – 19%

Underlying the discussion of graphic organizers and scaffolding was another area of concern that frequently came up in PLC discussions: the tendency of students to approach academic writing as a procedure to be completed as opposed to a means to communicate ideas.

One participant framed it as a desire of students to satisfy the goals of the teacher:

“This is like a big theme, it's like they're very much box-checkers when it comes to doing things. They're very much like, “Okay, three pieces of evidence. One, two, three. And this looks like a Hamlet essay. This looks like how Ms. C wants us to do it.”

The idea of academic writing as means to communicate ideas instead of simply as a task to be completed seemed central to understanding how to write successfully for college.

One participant stated:

“Going back to what Teacher B said – **what's the point of writing the essay if you don't convince someone or convey an idea, a thought? And understanding, that is the key to whatever kind of writing you're going to do.** Because kids are going to be going to college, some are going to be writing science papers, math papers, history papers, and they take different formats. Like based on the class that I took I wasn't writing five-paragraph essays, but we had to write something every week and it had to be like a page long or something. So I didn't have to make it super – you know, follow all these steps, but I knew like, okay, there should be an introduction of what this is going to be about, some examples, some elaboration on that, and then close it up with one nice sentence to end it. You know, it was like one of those every week. But understanding, **‘Okay, this is what I need to get across.’**”

Another participant mentioned that she struggled to find ways to support students in developing this understanding:

"I also think it's 'cause essays are kind of like, there's no good – I never can come up with a good comparison of like, "Well, it's like this other thing in real life." It's like a very – I mean I guess when you're having like a verbal argument, but it's so different, so much more sophisticated than that. There's like – there's nothing to really like ground it in that's like a real-world analog that I feel like helps them understand what the kind of purpose of an essay is."

Another participant found deep links to their own family culture:

"But I remember in my family, it was always arguing, and I just kind of remember that basic idea of it sort of being like combat, and you need to win. And what you need to do to win is take your evidence to prove your side and attack the person's evidence. Analysis is like getting down to those lengths of the critical chain to find the flaw in somebody else's argument."

Summary of Impact Data and Analysis of the Areas of Concern and the Problem of Practice

Participant discussion over the course of the PLC revealed a great level of detail on gaps teachers perceived between AMPUHS student writing and college-ready writing, and the challenges for teachers to address these gaps. Returning to the fundamental concern of this intervention, empowering students to be college-ready in writing, we can see how each of these areas of concern reveals a certain critical deficit in teaching writing that needs to be remedied. If "analysis" is the meat on the bones of an argumentative skeleton, formal logic is the sinew that links the muscles and the skeleton together into a functioning organism for the intellectual combat that is argumentation. Teacher concerns about the use of scaffolding have to do with students being able to internalize these rules of argumentation, as opposed to a procedural approach in which students fill in the chunks of an argumentative body, but fail to understand that they must ultimately create a living, breathing organism that functions as more as its component parts. Finally, allowing students to understand that writing, at its core, is the communication of ideas from one person to another, in a variety of formats, enables students to understand that the battlefield of argumentative writing is a landscape of ideas, ideologies, and intellectual principles. A lack of proficiency in academic, abstract language prevents students from seeing the fine, sharp points on these intellectual concepts.

This analogy, while fanciful, underscores the connectedness of the different strands of participant discussion in the PLC. Participant discussion also revealed ideas to move practice forward. As analysis of the implementation data will reveal, a chief difficulty will be in transmitting this information to teachers new to AMPUHS who were not part of the PLC.

Process Data Overview:

Implementation data had two primary sources: transcripts of the six PLC meetings, exit tickets from the meetings, and post-intervention interviews with participants.

Process Data: Teacher Social Dynamics in the PLC

Another pattern that emerged from the coded transcripts of PLC meetings was a social dynamic: conversations tended to be dominated by two group members who had more teaching experience than the rest of the group. Furthermore, these two more experienced “dominating” teachers made substantially more comments that referenced perceived student deficits or deficits in existing curriculum. This social dynamic might at first seem to be predictable and not worthy of analysis; however, I believe that close study of these patterns of interaction can be extremely informative in understanding the way in which teachers are socialized into the institutional society of a school and the social process by which curriculum is passed on and received from teacher to teacher. One interesting phenomenon was a high density of charged and emotional language that was used by one participant when referring about instructional practices the participant had inherited from another teacher, used for a period of time, and then discarded from her practice.

Quantitatively analyzing selected portions of PLC transcripts reveals some interesting trends in teacher participation:

- Three “dominant” members of the PLC made 74% of all coded comments
- The “dominant” members of the PLC were teachers with four or more years of teaching experience, as opposed to the other three “quiet” group members, who were either in their first or second year of teaching
- The tone of “dominant” teachers had some notable differences from that of “quiet” teachers
 - “Dominant” teachers referred to student deficits in 25% of coded comments
 - “Quiet” teachers referred to student deficits in 8% of coded comments
 - “Dominant” teachers referred to deficiencies in curriculum in 12% of coded comments
 - “Quiet” teachers made no comments about deficiencies in curriculum
- Equity of teacher participation increased in two conditions:
 - When PLC discussion focused on an instructional material created by a “quiet” teacher
 - When PLC agenda had a modality where “dominant” PLC teachers were paired together and “quiet” teachers were paired together

At first glance, it would seem like “dominant” teachers were simply both more verbose and more negative. Under this interpretation, PLC formats that constrained their dominance and encouraged equity of participation should be used frequently.

However, the trend in the data could also be interpreted as the “dominant” teachers having a greater level of comfort in surfacing actual student needs and problems with curriculum that needed to be addressed. Under this interpretation, teachers become more confident with experience in asserting opinions and violating social norms of not talking about student deficits, possibly to the benefit of the stated goal of improving instructional outcomes.

A post-intervention interview with a “dominant” participant revealed little concern with the issue of equity of voice. Instead, the “dominant” participant seemed to relish being able to strongly express her opinions.

The participant said:

“I loved the PLC because I got to take the role of a lead teacher, but I didn’t have to actively facilitate or plan the agendas.

However, in an exit ticket, the same participant expressed frustration when another “dominant” teacher had led a discussion into a digression on thesis-writing and topic sentences:

“Rather than continuing last week’s session of analysis, we veered into a lengthy discussion of thesis statements and topic sentences. Although that may have been beneficial for some people, it would have been nice to end the analysis conversation with something more concrete like what do we want analysis to look like, and how can we teach it.”

A post-intervention interview with a “quiet” participant surfaced a more reflective position on equity of voice. However, the “quiet” participant also noted the usefulness of “strong voices” in crystallizing and expressing positions that might be held by other teachers as well.

The “quiet” participant stated:

Well, we do have some really strong voices on our staff. They do sometimes drown out other people, and that can be a real problem, because you don’t really get the opinion of everybody involved. But on the other hand, some of the strong voices do a really good job of bringing out the points that other people agree with.

Analysis of the PLC transcripts also revealed some key moments of transition when “quiet” participants stepped up to challenge the statements of “dominating” teachers. The following exchange is representative:

Teacher A: ... Like getting a five-page essay out of them is basically impossible for me. Even if I say it has to be five pages, because they're so used to the certain structures that they learn: you have your thesis, you have your three or four main ideas, one piece of evidence per paragraph, and then when you're asking them again, it has to do with complexity. But to take their argument to the next level, it's like hard so hard and so many times I've heard people say, "I don't know what else to write."

Teacher B: Mr. W_ got the ninth graders to write a ten-page paper, a research paper.

Teacher A: Yeah. He also worked on it for a couple months.

The defensive, "put-down" response of Teacher A to Teacher B can possibly be interpreted as showing a desire of Teacher A to strongly push back challenges, and especially to defend any implication that another teacher might have overcome challenges that were resistant to her own teaching efforts. This pattern of teacher behavior is closely linked to another phenomenon that surfaced in analysis of process data of this intervention: teacher pushback against collaborative structures that surfaced teacher anxieties and insecurities about inadequacy.

Process Data: Teacher Pushback to Peer Shadowing and Lesson Tuning

The researcher revised the intervention action plan in response to a preponderance of teacher requests to more deeply engage in discussion of curriculum before pushing forward into peer observations and lesson tuning. However, there were interesting patterns in the teacher feedback that led to this decision. The feedback centered around three expressed concerns:

- It was redundant to do peer observations, because another, simultaneous professional development arc on supporting Long Term English Learners also incorporated peer observations.
- Peer observations were not useful in a discussion of writing because there was "nothing to see" when students were engaged in writing
- It was cumbersome and inauthentic to develop instructional strategies for lesson-tuning because "timing" issues meant that strategies regarding student writing did not take place at the time teachers had planned for students to engage in writing projects

While all three of these concerns could be considered reasonable on their face, they also could be interpreted as being rationalizations to avoid having other eyes and ears present in the classroom practice of teachers. It is notable that one of the "dominant" teachers had expressed an earlier aversion to observations, during the failed implementation of the "Visalia model". The teacher had framed the objection on grounds that observations decreased the quality of teaching for students.

Teacher A expressed her concern as follows:

“When you come into the classroom, it throws me off. I feel awkward, like I have to impress someone or something. Then I get in a bad mood and I take it out on the students after you leave.”

One possible interpretation for Teacher A’s reaction both to announced observations and peer observations, as well as planned sequences of the intervention that involved sharing her practice with other teachers, could come from some of the findings of Ball and Cohen. Ball and Cohen note that in the culture of American public education, the teachers who are viewed as being the most successful and most influential are also know for creating their own curriculum (Ball and Cohen, 1996). By this line of reasoning, a teacher’s classroom practice, as well as their own created curriculum, are creations that are closely bound to a teacher’s self-perception of success and effectiveness. While teachers quickly become inured (and often unresponsive) to the constant evaluative feedback they receive from children in their classroom, their practice as educators is much less frequently evaluated by other adults. Therefore, moments of adult evaluation of a teacher’s work are high stakes moments. While adult evaluation can provide the ultimate affirmation of a teacher’s self-worth, they also pose the risk of devaluing the teacher’s achievement and positive self-identity (Hansen, 2010).

Thus, it could be considered very natural for teachers to be avoidant of exposing their work to the scrutiny of other adults. This implementation data can be useful in framing further teacher development at AMPUHS. Clearly, it is very important that teachers feel a high degree of safety when opening their practice to others. Indeed, some research suggests that rather than having a master-novice dichotomy in peer observations, it is more often successful to arrange peer-observations between teachers who are both new to the profession, and to frame the peer-observation as more of a shared journey, as opposed to an evaluative experience (Hansen, 2010).

To summarize, analysis of process data reveals challenges to effective implementation of a PLC that will likely remain factors at even a relatively positive working environment like AMPUHS. As AMPUHS continues to deal with the ongoing teacher turnover that is characteristic of an urban school, it may be that teachers with even relatively small amounts of experience in an absolute sense will continue to feel the need to demonstrate dominance and assertiveness to their less experienced peers. These same teachers may also feel defensive of their relative status, and may resist structures like observation, which could deprivatize their practice and potentially offer disconfirming data concerning their feelings of competence. Yet, these developing, dominant, insecure teachers are crucially valuable – as their confidence and defensiveness makes them more willing to surface actual deficits and structural problems than emerging teachers in their first or second year in the occupation.

An urban school like AMPUHS can still find ways to employ the PLC as a means of increasing teacher effectiveness in writing. Crucial takeaways include the need to create very high levels of perceived safety on the part of both developing and emerging

teachers. For examples, peer observations that are framed as opportunities to prove the effectiveness of a strategy or to receive critical feedback are likely to be resisted. A peer observation initiative framed as a shared journey undertaken fellow novice teachers to develop structures of support is much more likely to be successfully received. The underlying goal of creating opportunities to share practice will still be obtained.

Furthermore, teachers at AMPUHS seemed resistant to the idea of opening up their own curriculum to criticism and feedback. The idea of teachers developing a strategy and then having it be evaluated by peers was not appealing to “dominant” teachers in the PLC. Again, this structure contained all the potential anxiety of the “dominant” teacher needing to “prove” their relative superiority. However, teachers were much more willing to discuss the instructional materials created by other people, and these discussions opened up avenues for teachers to co-construct knowledge about curriculum.

Fundamentally, a strategy of sensitivity on the part of leaders to the anxieties of teachers seems likely to yield much greater benefits than more aggressive approaches, which can cause Hargreave’s well-established phenomenon of “contrived collegiality” to rear its passive-aggressive head – expressed in initial enthusiasm and then strategic foot-dragging and long-term resistance (Hargreaves, 1991).

Implications and Conclusion:

Several factors led to my modification of my planned intervention agenda for my PLC, leading me to increase the effective autonomy of the PLC. In the early stages of the intervention, my position and workload changed substantially, and limits to my own capacity resulted in the PLC setting their own agendas, which drifted away from some aspects of the original intervention, like peer-observations.

Nevertheless, research suggests that this autonomy should not necessarily have led to a negative outcome. Though it was challenging for me as a research to see the PLC choose not to engage in a peer observation cycle, I was sustained by the knowledge that my literature review suggested that granting autonomy to teacher participants was among the most important qualities of a successful professional learning community. Forcing the PLC to follow external directives would lead to problems of pseudo-community and inauthentic teacher participation.

It is difficult to weigh the costs and benefits of departing from the planned model of the intervention, since much of it involves conjecture and hypothesis.

There were some clear takeaways:

- teachers stated that they appreciated being granted autonomy to pursue the natural course of the reflective dialogue
- teachers had the opportunity to engage in deep discussion and analysis of a challenging and substantive pedagogical issue

There were also costs:

- the goal of creating shared practice through peer observations and a lesson-tuning protocol did not take place, since teachers did not opt to engage in it
- the intervention did not result in any concrete takeaways or deliverables that could be used by the participating teachers or anyone else at the school.

The lack of concrete takeaways is especially problematic given the particular context of this PLC. Two of the six participating teachers are departing from the school, and none of the three remaining teachers are members of the English Language Arts department. To whatever extent that the discussions of the PLC produced lasting gains in the knowledge of the participants, those gains will not be directly accessible to the members of the new ELA department. Research strongly suggests that teachers do not profit from being given explicit information or curriculum but need to be involved in the co-construction of knowledge themselves in order to effectively incorporate that information into their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

This suggests that AMPUHS's several new English Language Arts teachers must be given the opportunity to examine student work and engage in reflective conversations themselves. Therefore, the best opportunity to use the findings of this research to improve instructions is for the researcher to engage in discussion about the PLC and its findings with the new facilitator of writing instructors, identify and explain areas of concern as zones for ongoing discussion over the course of the year, and collaborate with ELA lead as she constructs new professional learning experiences for the department.

Some of the findings of this intervention can form a useful framework for the undertakings of the almost entirely-new AMPUHS ELA department. They suggest that an early focus on establishing a common rubric for writing, as well as examining external standards of college-readiness, can surface extremely valuable discussions around areas of challenge in teaching students writing. Another useful strategy learned from the AMPUHS Writing PLC is to offer a piece of "neutral" instructional material to use as a focus for discussing instruction. Furthermore, some of the materials used for the AMPUHS Writing PLC can serve as neutral objects for discussion

However, in the final analysis, this researcher is guided by much of the literature and philosophy that he has been exposed to throughout his experience in the Reach Instructional Leadership Academy. Fundamentally, individuals need to have their own experience of data to be able to come to their own understanding of a problem or practice. Those of us who have already experienced the journey can devise strategies and structures to effectively communicate our own perspective; nevertheless, we will be met with a lack of success in our efforts when we try to impose our perspective on others. The best we can do is to offer our lived experience as a resource only at those times when it is genuinely asked for, and do our best to wait for those infrequent opportunities with graceful but urgent patience.

To wit, the new AMPUHS ELA department will almost certainly find its own tangled path to engage with the thorny problem of teaching students how to write. This researcher will do well to limit the expression and assertion of his opinions to that developing group. Those opinions will almost certainly be less listened to the more often they are heard. Instead, successful leadership will more likely look like the strategic posing of short but thoughtful questions: questions that will set the fledgling group down the tangled path, but still leave them with the freedom to prick themselves on the thorns, and in so doing, learn.

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Appendix A:

Pre-Intervention Interview Questions

What was your training in pre-service (undergraduate education, teacher credentialing program) to teach writing to students?

What was the most useful part of your training? How did it specifically prepare you for teaching writing?

If your pre-service training was insufficient to fully prepare you for teaching writing, how did you learn to teach writing during the time you have been a teacher? What would you describe as your key experience or key mentor? Why do you think that this experience or mentor was influential?

What is your basic instructional approach to teaching writing? How do you think this approach causes students to learn?

What do you feel are the strengths of your personal approach to teaching writing?

What do you feel are the weaknesses of your personal approach to teaching writing?

What instructional materials do you use to support your approach to teaching writing?

What do you think is the most critical skill for our students to master in order to become successful writers? How do you address that critical skill in your own approach to teaching writing?

What do you think is the most common cause of low student outcomes in writing? How do you address that root cause of low achievement in your own approach to teaching writing?

What do you think is the greatest challenge facing teachers at our school in teaching writing? What do you think the school can do to support overcoming that challenge?

Pre-Intervention Survey Questions

How adequate was your pre-service training in writing instruction?

- 1 – Poor
- 2 – Fair
- 3 – Good
- 4 – Very good
- 5 – Excellent

How would you rate your current comfort level in teaching writing?

- 1 – Poor
- 2 – Fair
- 3 – Good
- 4 – Very good
- 5 – Excellent

How effective do you feel AMPUHS is in teaching writing to students?

- 1 – Extremely Ineffective
- 2 – Ineffective
- 3 – Somewhat effective
- 4 – Effective
- 5 – Extremely effective

Do you feel AMPUHS has a coherent and consistent vision of writing instruction?

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

Intervention Exit Tickets

How relevant did you feel this session was to the goal of improving writing instruction?

- 1 – Not at all relevant
- 2 – Slightly relevant
- 3 – Somewhat relevant
- 4 – Very relevant
- 5 – Extremely relevant

How would you rate the overall effectiveness of this session?

- 1 – Poor
- 2 – Fair
- 3 – Good
- 4 – Very good
- 5 – Excellent

How would you rate the facilitator's effectiveness in conducting this session?

- 1 – Poor
- 2 – Fair
- 3 – Good
- 4 – Very good
- 5 – Excellent

What comments or feedback would you have for this session?

What suggestions would you have for the next session?

Post-Intervention Survey Questions

How would you rate the effectiveness of this intervention overall?

- 1 – Extremely Ineffective
- 2 – Ineffective
- 3 – Somewhat effective
- 4 – Effective
- 5 – Extremely effective

How would you rate your current comfort level in teaching writing?

- 1 – Poor
- 2 – Fair
- 3 – Good
- 4 – Very good
- 5 – Excellent

How effective do you feel AMPUHS is in teaching writing to students?

- 1 – Extremely Ineffective
- 2 – Ineffective
- 3 – Somewhat effective
- 4 – Effective
- 5 – Extremely effective

Do you feel AMPUHS has a coherent and consistent vision of writing instruction?

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

How confident do you feel in continuing the PLC work on writing?

- 1 – Not at all confident
- 2 – Slightly confident
- 3 – Somewhat confident
- 4 – Moderately confident
- 5 – Extremely confident