Overview

Five schools participated in the Writing Matters Program this year however, only two schools contributed data for the entire year: Amy Northwest (grades 7 and 8) and Parkway Northwest (grades 9). Feltonville, Grover Washington, and Paul IV were unable to collect data on a systematic basis due to scheduling, administrative, and teacher issues that surfaced during the year. Other issues that may have affected the quality of data include a teacher at Amy Northwest, who was responsible for teaching the Writing Matters Program to all seventh and eighth graders, left the school for medical reasons in January. After a series of substitute teachers, another teacher was hired in May to finish the program at this school. This teacher was familiar with the Writing Matters Program and was able to provide students with instruction despite the three month hiatus.

Despite these issues that impacted the participating schools this year, the data obtained from the remaining schools and teachers who fully participated in the program did not drastically change from prior years. In fact, the data continue to show that the Urban Writers Program has a strong, positive impact on the majority of participating students in three major ways:

- It improves writing skills
- It helps students to better understand themselves
- It provides students with a broader view of other teen’s struggles and the world at large

The following are some key quotes taken directly from the students’ final surveys regarding the overall impact of the program:

- “It will definitely make you a better person.” (Parkway Northwest, ninth grader)
- “It showed me the talents of people and I learned that anyone could be a good writer.” (Parkway Northwest, ninth grader)
- “I learned how to open up to others.” (Parkway Northwest, ninth grader)
- “I would tell him/her that it wasn’t a walk in the park. You have to use your brain a lot and there’s a lot of work involved.” (Amy Northwest, seventh grader)
- “I would say it was a very special program. I learned about the world in a whole other way.” (Amy Northwest, seventh grader)
- “I would respond by saying that it was a good experience for me and I learned that you can be yourself through your writings and you never know who you might make friends with in that process.” (Amy Northwest seventh grader)
- “It will let you know that you’re not the only person going through problems in life. It would help you grow up mentally and give you the strength to WRITE!” (Amy Northwest, seventh grader)
• “I would say that the program was a good experience for me because it gave me a chance to express myself. I learned how to express myself through writing and how to write down my anger instead of reacting.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)
• “The program just brought out the writer in me and showed me what a good writer I am.”
• “I would tell them that it was a ride – an adventure that I will never forget.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)
• “I would say that it was a nice experience because it helps you learn more about yourself. I learned how to write more freely.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)
• “Write about memories and wishes, friends and family, love and hate – that’s what I did and I have learned more about my character as well as others!” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)
• “The Writing Matters Program was a loving, heart warming, [and] motivating experience. I’ve developed a family throughout the program and discovered who I am. I am no longer afraid to say how I feel or worry about what my peers will think. I am happy about this experience.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)
• “I would tell them that this is a wonderful program, and it matures not only your writing but your mind also. It helps you to see things from others point of view.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)

The negative comments had mostly to do with not liking to write or finding the classes boring or tedious. One example below illustrates many of the other students who did not find this program to be helpful from the three schools:
• “To me it was boring. The only fun part was watching movies like the Freedom Writers and the Great Debaters.” (Amy Northwest, eighth grader)

Journal Writing Data

As a way to measure the extent to which students of schools made progress over the year in their writing skills as a result of the Urban Writers Program, both beginning and end of the year journals were scored by an independent evaluator hired by the project staff. The pre- and post-test writing samples were judged based on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Writing rubric. The rubric contains the following domains measured on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (high):

1 Information obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Writing Assessment Handbook.
• Focus (The writer clearly addresses the topic; an assertion or thesis topic is made; writing responds directly to prompt)
• Content (Assertions are supported with relevant details that support the main idea)
• Organization (An introduction and conclusion are evident; content is arranged in appropriate order; transitional devices are used)
• Style (Specific language and sentence structure are used to promote voice and tone; the writer is aware of “audience”)
• Conventions (Includes grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formation)

Two schools provided pre- and post-test writing data: Parkway Northwest (grade 9) and Amy Northwest (grade 8). Unfortunately, writing samples from grades 7 from Amy Northwest were not evaluated because students wrote Haiku poems instead of journals. Therefore their post-test writing could not be evaluated based on the PSSA writing rubric. The following shows the progress students made in their writing over time in the two schools.

**Parkway Northwest**

The table below shows the pre- and post-test gains made by ninth grade students at Parkway Northwest in the four PSSA rubric domains. These aggregate data show that students made the most progress in the organization of their writing with a pre- to post-test difference of .47 and in the area of style (.2 positive difference). Overall, students at Parkway Northwest made gains from pre- to post-testing in all rubric domains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northwest Grade 9</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Org</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
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<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.61</td>
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</table>

The figure below shows the mean aggregate gains made by students at Northwest across all rubric domains from pre- to post-testing.
Amy Northwest

Two eighth grades were separately evaluated for gains made in their writing skills from pre- to post-test evaluation based on the PSSA writing rubric. As the table below shows, and similar to Parkway Northwest, students made the most gains in the organization of their writing with a positive difference of .41. The second category resulted in moderate gains in style, with a positive difference of .21. Overall, students in Room 801 showed gains in all areas from pre-to post-testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amy Northwest 801</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Org</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>2.55</td>
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<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
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<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.52</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figure below depicts the mean aggregate pre- and post-testing gains made by eighth grade students in room 801 across all domains.

The data show that the room 802 eighth grade class at Amy Northwest made more progress across all writing domains than room 801 described earlier. The largest gain from the pre- to post-test PSSA rubric evaluation was found in the area of style (.59). Other gains were made in organization (.46), focus (.4), and content (.22). The mean gain of .42 across all writing domains is larger than Northwest and the other eighth grade class at this school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amy Northwest</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Org</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
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<td>2.47</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
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<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figure shows the significant gain across all domains for this class of eighth grade students. Given that both classes had the same teacher, the differences may be due to other unknown factors such as the number of mentors assigned to this room, the dispositions of the students in this class, or the class
climate, which may have been more cohesive or positive than the other eighth grade class at Amy Northwest.

![Bar chart showing pre and post-test scores for Amy Northwest 802]

Writing Summary:

Overall, the pre- and post-test scores of students from whom we were able to collect data showed moderate growth over the year. Although we cannot directly attribute the Writing Matters program as solely responsible for these gains since other curricula at the school also contribute to the writing skills of these students, it is clear that this program in combination with other data described below does indeed assist students in the development of their writing skills and the confidence they gain from continuously writing journals, receiving feedback, and sharing their writing with others.

End-of-Year Surveys

A total of 166 surveys were analyzing using the qualitative coding procedures of Corbin and Strauss (2008) from ninth graders attending the Parkway Northwest High School and seventh and eighth graders attending the Amy Northwest School. The survey contained five questions listed below:

1. Describe how the Writing Matters Program has influenced your writing skills. Has it helped you to become a better writer?

2. Have the writing assignments helped you better understand yourself? Please explain.

3. Have the writing assignments helped you to better understand others? Please explain.

4. How has the Writing Matters Program prepared you for high school?

5. If another student said to you, “I will be involved in the Writing Matters Program next year. What was it like for you? What did you learn?” How would you respond?

Using qualitative analysis, excerpts from the data were first coded based on each question type in order to capture the essence of the students’ responses. These data were then thematically organized into larger units of data and then cross-categorized into appropriate themes. The ultimate purpose was to
capture, to the greatest extent possible, the students’ true thinking based on their experiences in the Writing Matters Program. The schools’ data were analyzed separately to discern any differences in the way the program was delivered to students. To ensure the validity of the data analysis, all negative responses were counted and reported. These larger themes were counted to discern the extent to which students identified specific areas which they believed the program helped them.

Although each student survey was analyzed separately by grade and school, the data showed amazingly similar trends across schools. Aggregate data from student surveys revealed that the program helped them to:

- Improve their writing skills
  - Writing skills (content, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, organization)
  - Expressing ideas freely (feelings, thoughts, experiences)
- Understand themselves on a deeper level
  - Enhancing self-awareness
  - Knowing strengths and weaknesses
  - Taking personal responsibility
  - Developing confidence and maturity
- Understand the perspectives of their peers
  - Developing empathy for others’ situations
  - Finding commonality with peers on mutual struggles
  - Seeing the larger world view
- Preparation for High School
  - Knowing what to expect regarding writing
  - Having the confidence that they can succeed through hard work

Below is an analysis of the end-of-year surveys completed by students at the Parkway Northwest and Amy Northwest Schools:

Parkway Northwest:

The figure below depicts the students’ views regarding the major areas that they felt the Writing Matters Program helped them based on answers to their questions on the survey:
Only one student indicated that the program did not prepare him/her for high school, while others noted that they improved their vocabulary, learned how to write poetry, learned how to analyze and respond to literature, and learned a lot of different writing formats instead of answering more directly as to whether the program prepared them for high school. With regard to “understanding peers,” only two students noted that the program did not help them to understand their classmates better. Similarly, only one student indicated that the program did not help him/her to understand self because the student was already self-aware. With regard to the category of improved writing skills, one student did not attribute the program as having an impact on his/her writing skills, while other responses to the first question, while not saying directly that the program improved their writing, wrote instead the following:

- The program pushed me to work harder;
- The program taught me to better analyze my work;
- The program allowed me to express myself more as a student, and;
- The program expanded my mind when working.

Amy Northwest:

The end-of-year surveys of the seventh and eighth grade classes at Amy Northwest were analyzed separately. Due the change of teachers these survey data results were mixed. The majority of students noted that they enjoyed and benefited from the program, however others indicated that the program did not affect them at all. Below are the results from the seventh grade group regarding the percentage of students who believed the program assisted them in the following ways:
The figure above depicts the average percentage of agreement of students in the seventh grade at Amy Northwest regarding the major categories of the survey instrument. The highest percent was found in writing skills development. The other categories obtained similar results.

Thirteen or eighteen percent of students who responded negatively to the question regarding how well the program enhanced an understanding of self revealed that these students already knew about themselves so the program really did not change them in that way. An equal number of students noted that the program did not enhance their self-understanding, while eight students wrote that their writing helped other students understand them instead of the opposite interpretation.

For those students who responded that the program did not help prepare them for high school, the typical response was that high school was too far removed from seventh grade, while others noted that they did not enjoy the program or did not like to write, and others were unsure of whether the program helped them or not in preparation for the future.

With regard to understanding peers better as a result of the program, some students noted that they did not care about hearing others’ stories, while others noted that there was not much sharing of peer work in class. This latter comment is problematic since the focus of the program is the sharing so that students can gain a new perspective on their personal adolescent issues.
Amy Northwest grade eight results revealed more variation among the categories as depicted in the above figure. Students in this cohort showed a higher percentage agreement that the Writing Matters Program helped their preparation for high school, to understand peers, and improve writing skills. The lowest category, understanding self, showed 33% of the students who did not believe the program helped them to understand themselves in a deeper way, while 14% of students felt that they knew themselves very well without the program. The remaining few were uncertain as to whether the program helped them to understand themselves. It is interesting to note that some of the students in this grade did not appear to understand the question as evidenced by responses that did not make sense.

This was also true of for some of the students who negatively responded to the question about whether the program helped them to better understand others. Some of the students’ responses had nothing to do with the question. Overall, the majority of students found that the program really helped them to prepare for high school, understand their peers, and improve their writing skills.

It should be noted that there were several end-of-year surveys that alluded to the loss of their teacher during the year. Other survey responses revealed that some students did not benefit from the program. A few responses are included below:

- When one student was asked whether the writing assignments helped him/her to better understand others, one student replied, “No, because I haven’t read others.”
- “This program was really short so it didn’t prepare me for high school.”
- “I only had a few writing assignments and I don’t feel that they helped me better understand myself.”
- “No, because we only did one thing about everyone and it wasn’t an assignment.”
- “It didn’t help me to become a better writer because he only showed us different writer’s poems.”
• “Really, to be honest, I haven’t learned anything from my new teacher, but from Mr. L who isn’t here because of a health complication.”

It should be noted that data collected from prior years did not have as many negative surveys as the Amy Northwest School did this year. This is likely because of the fact that the teacher left on a medical leave from the school mid-year and a series of substitute teachers finished the year. Some of the survey responses as a result sounded angry and resentful. It has become markedly clear that program content stability should be a focus next year (see recommendations). Although it is impossible to predict what will happen in any given year, careful planning for any eventuality may alleviate some of these issues.

Mentor Data

This was the first year that we collected data on the work the mentors were doing with students in the classroom. The mentors kept weekly logs of their work and reflections on the experience. These records were maintained at Parkway Northwest and Amy Northwest for the entire year. Logs from Grover Washington and Central were maintained for only half of the year due to issues discussed earlier. Most of the mentoring was conducted one-on-one or in small group settings with students identified by the teachers as needing extra help. An analysis of these logs revealed the following themes:

• All mentors preferred small group or one-on-one instruction. The mentors felt that the small groups allowed them to get to know the students better and allowed more of a personal connection with students. It was also pointed out that trust is an essential quality of the mentor-mentee relationship.
  o “We started to open up with the girls and I think they realized that we aren’t all that different. We all have memories that we hold that are not pleasant, and have all experienced some rough things in life. I think after this session we had really earned some trust between them [and us].” (Parkway, 4/2/09)
  o “Once again the small group was more beneficial – the interaction was more intimate so the kids had an easier time hearing my advice and understanding it.” (Parkway, 10/23/08)
  o “I liked this session, however, I would like to sit down with less students to really make a connection with the students and help them with their writing on a more personal level.” (Amy Northwest, 10/7/08)
  o “I enjoyed having the 1:1 time with the student.” (Central, 11/20/08)
  o “Today’s session went really well. I feel I had good conversations with the students, and we got to know each other more.” (Grover, 11/5/08)
  o “I found it easier to work on an individual basis with one student compared to many students. I feel that I can get across to the students better this way, too. (Grover, 10/8/08)

• All mentors’ logs noted the shock and surprise they felt hearing some of the personal life stories of the students. This led some to reflect on how different their own personal experiences were from their students. For others, listening to these stories was an eye-opening experience.
“This was my first experience with the writing program and it has been a much more powerful experience than I ever anticipated. I left the school in shock of the students’ poems.” (Central, 12/2/08)

“I just found it so unreal that they are so young and are being pressured to have sex and all the issues I had at 16 are now theirs at 13.” (Central, 10/7/08)

“I was blown away by some of the stories these kids had to tell from such a young age.” (Grover Washington, 9-24-08)

“I was shocked to hear what they write and talk about.” (Amy Northwest, 9/23/08)

“We listened to some of the kid’s poetry. It was a bit overwhelming, but a good experience overall.”

All of the logs told personal stories that were shared by their mentees and the impact the mentoring program had on the students and on themselves as mentors.

“...one of my students, who I’ve had every week now said that at first he didn’t like coming to it [mentoring session] but then he did because he liked to listen to what others wrote so he said that others will like to read what we write.” (Central, 11/13/08)

“One girl in particular, Portia, impressed me with her public speaking skills as well as her writing skills. She had great detail and really inspired the other girls.” (Amy Northwest, 10/23/08)

“It was nice to have an appropriate, mature discussion of their memoirs and what they have experienced. I think that these girls have come a long way. It was a pretty emotional session because while their memoirs are about the past, some things are reoccurring in their homes...” (Parkway, 4/16/09)

“I am continually impressed with what these students write and share. They are using their outlets for freely expressing themselves. You can’t force that on students, so I am glad to see that it is happening naturally.” (Amy Northwest, 4/20/09)

“This session went really well. I really feel like I am making a connection with these students. I feel like they are putting a lot of effort into their poems and that they really do care about the program.” (Central, 9/23/08)

“For the first time meeting them I felt like they really opened up and were willing to share anything about their lives and were very intuitive for being only 12-14 years old.” (Central, 11/3/08)

“I notice that we often do more listening than teaching. I am seeing why UW is about “mentoring” not just “writing tutoring.” (Amy Northwest, 4/20/09)

“One boy spoke about how his father was in jail for 35 years. Another boy spoke about his cousin getting shot, and then his uncle (his father figure) getting shot a week later. The boy expressed how sad he was and began crying in the classroom. A girl spoke about her best day, her birthday. However, at the end of her birthday the police took her and her friends to the police station because they were out past curfew with no parents to be found. Today was a really emotional experience.”
Summary:

The mentors’ work was largely comprised of working one-on-one and in small groups with students. They helped the students brainstorm ideas for their journals, taught them how to edit their own and others work, and got to know their students on a personal level. They indicated that it was the personal connection that worked the best for them. Establishing trust with the students was essential in getting them to open up and share their stories in writing with the mentors and peers. Further, many of the mentors were surprised and sometimes shocked to hear the sometimes painful life stories of their mentees. This had an obvious, major impact on the mentors thinking over time.

Teacher data

In the beginning of the year we asked participating teachers to keep a weekly log of their instructional focus and reflections as they nurtured students through the Writing Matters Program. There was little follow-through on this request. However, three teachers provided end-of-year reflections on the experience, which will be included here. The teachers were from Feltonville (no other data was collected from this school), Paul IV, and Parkway Northeast.

Feltonville:

Several themes emerged from the essay from the Feltonville teacher. She discussed briefly the lack of administrative support, along with some personal issues, which eventually led her to drop out of the project. Several important themes related to the benefits, from her viewpoint, of the Writing Matters Program:

- She felt closer to the students who opened up in their journals;
- She saw the progress that the students made in their writing over time;
- She saw how the program encouraged many students to open up to her and to their classmates through writing;
- Two important aspects of the program were the video of Michael Galbraith’s students and the mentoring component of the program by La Salle University students.

Parkway Northwest:

This teacher made the connection that the Writing Matters Program is about giving students an opportunity to make sense of the world around them through reading and writing and then providing students with a variety of writing methods for expressing their ideas and experiences. He pointed out that the program gave him many tools that he incorporated into his teaching. Some other important notes on the program are included below:

- The book written by Galbraith and Vogel was inspiring to students; the writings in that text served as valuable models for my students. It showed them that everyone can be a writer.
- The mentoring service offered through this program was invaluable for the students.
• Two events allowed students to see the power of writing: The event at the Please Touch Museum where his students met one of the original Freedom Writers and the trip to La Salle to visit the campus and listen to more from the Freedom Writer.

• This teacher also believed that the weekly meetings with other Writing Matters teachers were very beneficial as it is important to hear similar successes and struggles of teachers.

To sum up his essay, he closed with this message: “There is no question that [the program] offers a meaningful partnership between La Salle University and the School District of Philadelphia. The lives and voices of young Philadelphians are validated, while La Salle students gain a deeper sense of what it means to live and learn in struggling communities. Likewise, teachers are afforded an opportunity to learn with and from each other. It is a journey well worth continuing.”

Paul IV

Several themes emerged from this teacher’s essay. The first theme revolves around the powerful, deep connections that she was able to establish with her students because she learned so much about their personal experiences. Her words on this follows:

“...the Writers Matter program repeatedly forces me to step back, and open my eyes to exactly what my student’s lives are like, the troubles they face, the obstacles they overcome, and the strong desire they have to be heard and understood.”

When reading their journals she noted that the students became more real to her. Instead of looking at surface issues such as whether a student typically hands in homework or not, they become people with issues, family problems, stress, and dreams similar to her own.

Other important points made by this teacher follow:

• The program seemed to enhance the quality of students’ writing. She noted that students who rarely hand in writing assignments or complain about writing will write copiously in their journals, with higher level skills than they typically exhibit on traditional assignments.

• She noted that the program appears to also help students accept and understand each other. She noticed that the cliques in her room disappeared. “It brings a sense of classroom unity that I’ve never experienced before. When we are doing the Writing Matters Program, the class works as whole, not individual units.”

Summary:

These Writing Matters teachers were able to identify several important benefits of the Writing Matters program on their own thinking as well as their students’ writing, dispositions, and work ethic. First, these teachers were witness to improved writing skills of their students. The students appeared to be motivated to write because their writing was based on their personal stories and experiences. By opening up their lives, the teachers were able to make a personal connection to their students. Students
benefited from hearing their peers stories, which helped to create a bond between classmates. In one school the atmosphere transformed into a community of learners. The mentoring component was viewed as a valuable and worthwhile part of the program as well as other special events such as the visiting “freedom writer” and reading books written by students about this program.

Recommendations

After analyzing data over the past five years of the Writing Matters Program, I am convinced that this program offers middle level students an opportunity to:

• Improve their writing skills;
• Learn to write freely of their feelings and experiences;
• Learn more about themselves;
• Learn more about their peers and the larger world, and;
• Prepare for the rigors of high school and beyond.

It is vitally important, therefore, that this program, which has been introduced with varying success in many Philadelphia region schools, continue to be disseminated city-wide and beyond. In order for this endeavor to be successful, particular attention should be given to the training of teachers who will be participating in this program. It is important that the main themes of the program be addressed in a consistent manner by all teachers of this program. Schools should be asked to take a long-term commitment to using this program so that data collection on a larger scale can be conducted. Therefore, to ensure greater consistency in approach the following recommendations are made:

1. Establish a web site that can be used by teachers to share materials, journals, lesson plans, and ideas with others teaching in the program. This web site can also be used for data collection purposes by teachers and mentors to document their work and reflections on their work. The web site can also be used for on-line learning if face-to-face meetings become difficult.
2. Create and publish a teacher’s manual to accompany this program. It is vital that teachers have access to important content that should be covered and ways to deliver that content. A carefully sequenced scope and sequence as well as lesson plan ideas that relate to the five themes of the program should be included in the manual. The five themes are:
   a. What is happening to me?
   b. I am from...
   c. Teen challenges
   d. Family matters
   e. Living life
   f. Dreams, aspirations, and the future
3. Students should be given ample opportunities to share their stories with the class and the teacher so that multiple perspectives on issues confronting teens occur.
4. Students should be afforded opportunities to engage with the larger world and reflect on past or current events as they connect to their world such as the Holocaust, starvation in Africa,
homelessness, etc. This can be done through personal research, visits to museums, or through service learning projects.

5. Research should now be focused on micro- and macro-levels. It is important to establish a more direct relationship between good writing and how writing is taught in this program. This will require an extensive analysis of a sample of student journals in order for a model to emerge. A pilot project is currently being undertaken to look more closely at student writings by Marjie Allen. This work should continue. In addition, research on the macro level will involve schools/teachers staying with the program over time so that benchmark and PSSA data can be analyzed to measure the extent to which improvement in writing generalizes to other areas such as standardized and curriculum-based tests.

6. Further research regarding teacher and mentor data should continue for next year so as to capture, in more detail, the day-to-day operation of this program and its successes/failures based on reflections from people working directly with students.

7. The digital story project should continue with students and their mentors. This would add significantly to the growing research base of this project.