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AUTHOR Proia, Kathleen E.
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ABSTRACT

In planning a program of remedial English, college English faculties should ask several questions about the necessity of such a program, the needs of the students, the interests and capabilities of the teachers, the content of the courses, and the methods which can be applied in the remedial classroom. In addition, an effective remedial program should provide both counseling service for remedial students and a means by which instructors can determine whether their courses have helped the students. (JM)

Kathleen E. Proia
Chairman, English Department
Strayer College
Washington, D.C. 20005

"Lets's Hear It for Remedial English"

Kathleen E. Proia

Remedial Programs. My first reflections on being asked to speak on this topic took me back to the English conferences I had attended only a few years ago. It seems like, and indeed it was, just a short time ago that words like basic, developmental, and remedial rarely appeared on the programs for many English conventions. I vividly remember attending sessions in which the panelists suggested methods such as holding English classes in incense-scented, candle-lit classrooms and having students crawl over piles of foam rubber in order to stimulate them to write better. But times have changed rapidly in the past 5 or 6 years, and, though the problems probably haven't changed much, solutions have. Now words like basic, and English Skills are commonly seen on convention programs. Indeed, even the entire theme for this year's 4C's convention in Philadelphia is "What's really basic about teaching English." So the emphasis has shifted, and although many professors still may encourage seemingly outlandish methods for stimulating their students to write, increasing numbers among us feel very strongly that students will write better if they first know how to communicate effectively in good, solid English sentences and paragraphs. Many of us feel that the students who are confident about their basic writing skills will be able to express themselves more freely and more effectively.

With this return to the emphasis on basic skills, then, many colleges are in the process of creating, re-creating, or strength-

ening remedial English programs. And members of English departments involved in remediation are faced with some fundamental questions that must be answered before any program of remedial English will indeed be helpful to the students they were created to help.

The first of the questions that concerned English faculties should ask is, "Does your college need a remedial English program?" Though the answer to this question is probably affirmative in most colleges today, it should be carefully considered before the initiation of remedial courses. And if you feel that your college has a body of students who need remedial courses, I would next ask, "How do you know they need remedial English courses?" What is your evidence? We cannot allow the pied piper effect to make this decision for us. No remedial programs should be established unless it is clear that students in your college need such courses. Remember, remedial classes should be available to serve students who need them. Remedial programs should not be created where there is no need for them, and students should never be categorized "remedial" merely because such classes exist and should be filled. Professor Gwynne Evans of the English department at Harvard was quoted in the November 11, 1974, issue of TIME magazine as saying that most of the entering freshmen at Harvard could not write a simple, clear English sentence . . . that says what they mean. If your freshmen students have similar problems, then you probably do need a remedial program.

If your college has a clear need for a program of remedial

English, you should next determine what kinds of courses will most help your students. What are your students' needs? Do they need courses in vocabulary building, reading, study skills, basic writing skills? Rarely will a remedial program consist of just one English course. There are too many varieties in the backgrounds of most of our students for just one course to be of any real service to them. Some can read but not write, some can't do either. The best path to follow in this area is to begin with a core of remedial English courses, and then alter that core as necessary. This process may require that involved faculty annually revise remedial course offerings, and probably that would be a good thing. If there is any area in the teaching of college English which deserves constant attention, it is the area of remediation. And I think, too, that our high schools have begun to hear our shouts of protest, that too many of our students fresh from high school cannot read or write. As the high schools respond and hopefully produce students who have mastered more of the basic skills, our remedial programs must again change. The function of remedial courses is to fill in the gaps that exist in students' English backgrounds. As those gaps disappear or shift, the college English remedial courses must respond.

The next consideration is surely the most demanding to effect. "Who will design and teach these courses?" Criteria for this must include three qualifications. The ideal people to design and teach remedial English courses are those professors who are experienced in dealing with students of weak academic preparation, who are sincerely interested in creating programs to help bring

those students up to a functioning freshmen college student level, and finally, who are capable of designing and/or teaching remedial level courses. Most remedial programs that fail, that is, do not serve the students' needs, do so because they have been poorly planned or executed. Planning and designing remedial courses requires first of all that qualified people determine content appropriate for each course in the remedial program. What good is a remedial course which stresses the appropriate procedures of writing research papers when the students in it are unable to write clear sentences and coherent paragraphs? The best types of remedial programs meet the students at their point of capablility and build from that point to the level which will enable students to function in the college academic environment. All remedial programs must be designed to achieve that goal. And if reaching that aim requires writing course materials rather than selecting existing texts, or adopting in class procedures that vary from the lecture method, than the professors of remedial courses must make those admustments. If they fail to design remedial programs effectively then not only will the programs faid, but so will the students.

In addition to considering the content of remedial courses, one must also consider the various methods which can be applied in the remedial classroom. And it is from this area that the fundamental types of remedial programs emerge. Some remedial English programs carry college credit, usually justified through accreditation standards, others are exclusively non-credit. Some programs advocate giving academic grades, to let the students who can never function up to college standards know by failing at the beginning of their college careers, before they waste too

much time and money. Other programs feature a non-graded policy, to avoid further ego deterioration of the perpetually-failing student. Some remedial English programs carry deceptively euphemistic course titles, others bluntly reveal themselves as unmistakably preparatory courses. These variations, though food for stimulatingly heated discussions among English professors, probably have little effect on what a student actually learnes in his remedial courses. What certainly has a greater effect on the amount of help a student receives is the actural structure of the classroom activity. Most research indicates that remedial courses should have a relatively small student to teacher ratio. This has led to the development of some remedial programs which are individualized on a tutorial, one student to one instructor basis. Other programs feature use of computers and other hardware to help students learn. Still other programs are similar to learning laboratories. Manay remedial programs are sel-paced, and some are competency-based prescription programs. Surely there is no single approach which will of itself accomplish the ends in any remedial program, but an approach chosen on the basis of student needs and student adaptability will undoubtedly be the most successful.

Another point of variation between one remedial program and the next concerns how your college determines which students should enroll in remedial programs and which students need not. Here again, there are a number of methods used. Some refer to high school transcripts and class rank, placing students with low averages in high school English into college remedial courses. This method is probably the most inefficient, as we are well aware that high

school English courses vary greatly, and an A in English from one high school may well be a C or D from another. A much better determiner is testing. If you can find a standardized test that will clearly indicate a student's strengths and weaknesses in the areas that your college considers in its remedial programs, then a standardized exam administered before the student registers for his first semester will work well in specifying which students need remedial work. Another possibility is for the department to create an in-house examination, designed especially to test only those areas.

These possibilities are usually applied in remedial programs which are required of certain freshman students. In contrast, some remedial programs function on a more voluntary basis, in which all freshmen are informed that help is available for those who feel they need assistance in English skills, and the students themselves take the initiative and seek that help. Still other programs function on a prescription-like basis, in which the instructor of freshman compostion recommends to weak English students that they go to the developmental skills department for further help in English.

But regardless of whether remedial courses are requried or merely recommended to certain students, any type of remedial program will function more effectively if, along with the courses themselves, it offers another service - counseling. The importance of counseling remedial candidates even before they begin their first classes cannot be understated. Have a counselor talk with remedial candidates, explain their test results, if any, explain the purpose

of the remedial program, explain the value of that program to the students; the minutes spent on counseling will be of greater assistence psychologically to the students than any administrative attempt to conceal the true nature of skills courses by giving them fancy titles or even college credit. We are all aware that remedial students know when they are in remedial courses, in spite of what we may name the courses. The benefit of counseling the students is that they understand why they are in those courses and even more important, that they feel as though there has been made a personal effort to help them with weaknesses in their educational background. It is that personal touch that so often can make the difference between the student with potential who ultimately realizes that potential or who simply drops out of college.

Finally, then, an effective remedial program will have built into it a method by which the instructors can determine whether or not their courses have indeed helped the remedial students. Follow-up, whether it be by student questionnaire or by statistical records on the academic success of former remedial are possibilities here. But the point is that any type of remedial program is effective, and is worth having, only if it does equip the students to function more competently. Any type of remedial program which achieves that end is surely an unqualified success.