Developmental Writing Course Redesign: A Systems Approach to Student Writing Success

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Abstract

Forced to cope with a growing population of students under-prepared for college writing, a large community college in northern Texas engaged in a transformative redesign of its developmental writing sequence, streamlining two courses, various student support services, and technology applications to boost student success, retention, and performance. This session presents issues addressed by the redesign and research findings conveying its success.

Perspective

An April 2003 report by The College Board argues "(w)hether on paper or on screen, writing is an overlooked key to transforming learning in the United States" (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 13). Indeed, despite myriad government and industry reports touting the importance of literacy skills for academic and occupational success (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991; The Safflund Institute, 2007; U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2007), the report finds that most students "(c)annot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment" (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 16). Forced to cope with a growing population of students under-prepared for college writing, a large community college in northern Texas engaged in a transformative redesign of its sequence of developmental writing courses. This redesign effort systemically examined how the developmental writing program interacted with other departments and systems on campus. The goals were to boost student performance by aligning course activities with student support resources and using instructional technology to move students through the developmental writing program more rapidly.

Objectives of the Redesign

Since fall 2001, developmental writing courses have seen a fluctuating decline in student success and retention as measured by two performance indicators: success rate (percentage of students passing the course with a grade of A, B, or C) and retention rate (percentage of students who completed the course). These two measures indicated substantial performance discrepancies, defined as anticipated performance minus actual performance (*The ASTD training and development handbook*, 1996). The performance discrepancies for success and retention that prompted this redesign are as follows:

- (80% Desired Success Rate)-(70% Actual Success Rate)=**10%** performance discrepancy
- (90% Desired Retention Rate)-(50% Actual Retention Rate)= **40%** performance discrepancy

Poor student success rates and high numbers of students repeating courses after dropping or withdrawing is not fiscally responsible for an institution committed to stewardship of taxpayer's dollars.

Needs analysis

Recognizing that full "transformation" to positively affect these measures could not occur without analysis of the existing systems and resources (Hutchins, 1996; Reigeluth, 2004), the

redesign effort began with an identification of the principle issues to be addressed by the redesign, namely the following:

- accommodating individual needs among a diverse student body
- reducing class time devoted to reviewing and re-teaching basic skills
- increasing class time spent engaged in the writing process
- creating a replicable design and ensuring instructional consistency among a staff of adjunct faculty
- promoting transferability of skills to other disciplines
- moving students more quickly through developmental writing and into college level coursework

The redesign team also examined the systems already in place at the college to address these issues. While several student support services existed to help developmental writing students achieve success, these services resided in separate departments and thus required students to take advantage of them outside of class. Moreover, existing developmental writing courses did not make consistent use of technology to streamline instructional processes, provide feedback, and focus on individual learner needs.

Theoretical Framework

Faculty based the paradigm for student learning in redesign on a layered approach that relied on several theoretical influences, notably L.S. Vygotsky's writings on Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Zone of Proximal Development creates a foundational learning framework in which students can begin to learn where they are-- advancing through the Zone of Proximal Development toward the acquisition of higher level basic writing skills--and in the process develop cognitively and socially through peer interactions guided by an instructor/facilitator (Vygotsky, 1978). Of special importance to the redesign was current research on brain-compatible teaching, also known as brain-friendly learning (Elder, 2006; Smilkstein, n.d; Starlink, 2007). In brain-compatible teaching, faculty take into account the learning environment and physiological processes thought to build strong foundations for student learning. For example, faculty allowed students to meditate, complete short puzzles, or listen to soothing music prior to beginning any class period to promote a positive biochemical pre-disposition toward learning (Elder, 2006; Smilkstein, n.d; Starlink, 2007).

Theory and practice on differentiated instruction proved to be another strong influence on the project. In differentiated instruction, variances in student ability in diverse classrooms are addressed through curricular adjustments and adaptations designed to meet the needs of individual students (Tomlinson, 2001). Faculty relied heavily on a commercially available software to differentiate instruction through a process of automated assessments and that targeted individual learners with tailor-made instructional interventions (Wilson and Greene, 2007).

Designers also applied the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The concept of the learning community, particularly the linkage of courses, was also put to use in the redesign model (Boylan, 2002). The application of various presences in the redesign hybrid course—social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence--tied the redesign together in a unified, thematic way with student learning the focal point of the model, instructors as coaches or guides, and technology responsible for delivering

targeted and customized instructional interventions (Garrison, D. & Vaughan, N., 2007) (Tomlinson, 2001).

Key components of redesign

Logic demanded that student services share a much more intimate relationship with developmental writing students and that the redesign involve technology rich writing instruction. Moreover, it was imperative that the redesign move students more quickly through the sequence of developmental writing courses in order to place them into college level courses for which they would earn credit. Principal components of the redesign are detailed below.

1. The redesign combined two separate courses into a single 16-week semester. This did not reduce the contact hours for each course; rather it compressed each discrete course into two 8-week periods, which met 2 hours per day, Monday through Friday. This component of the redesign makes the writing instruction and acquisition of skills more efficient because of the seamless continuation of study between the successive courses and intensive immersion in the course content.
2. Technology was used to tailor instruction to individual student's specific areas of need. The course pioneered the use of ETS's Criterion Online Writing Evaluation Service for developmental writing instruction, a web-based program that allows students to write essays online on topics chosen by instructors and receive a real-time, immediate diagnostic feedback on the quality of the students' writing based on nationally recognized standards. Criterion also offers "Trait Feedback Analysis," which "focuses on grammar, usage and mechanics; style; and organization and development." Criterion's analysis also "provides both a summary and in-depth analysis of errors in an effort to pinpoint areas that require attention."
3. The course also made use of an e-learning platform that allows college instructors to "create part or all of their courses online using the widely recognized tools of Blackboard Learning System and quality, text-specific content from Houghton Mifflin software and textbooks in the subject area. In the course, Blackboard/Eduspace was used to assign homework, exercises, quizzes, tests, tutorials, and supplementary study material. The platform makes it easier for the instructor to track student "performance discrepancies" and to intervene with appropriate remediation and provides additional electronic "scaffolds" for student learning.
4. Student support services, study skills workshops, intervention specialists, and advising, were integrated into the redesigned course and are no longer either optional or extraneous activities for at-risk-students who particularly need them.

Although the redesigned course combines two developmental writing courses into one semester, students are enrolled as though they are in two separate courses so that they receive transcript credit for completing both courses. A summative assessment is administered to students at the end of the first 8-weeks in order to assign them a grade for the first course in the sequence and assure their readiness for the second course.

Evaluation Method

Since the primary impetus for the course redesign were student success and retention rates, these data were key to evaluating the success of course. Data used for this study were extracted from the college's official records database by administrative personnel in the institutional research office, not from reports by the faculty designing or teaching developmental writing courses. Success rates were determined by calculating the percentage of all students who registered for the course that received an A, B, or C in the course. Retention rates were determined by calculating the percentage of all students who registered for the course that did not drop or withdraw from it.

As noted previously, the redesigned course combines two developmental writing courses into one semester. However, students are assigned grades for each discrete course of which the redesign is comprised. This also allows for comparison of success and retention rates in the redesigned course to those in the traditional developmental writing courses. Although data collection is ongoing, this study reports data collected for two academic years: beginning with fall 2007 semester through spring 2009.

A variety of assessments of student learning outcomes were also implemented throughout the course, including the Accuplacer—the assessment used to place students in appropriate developmental or college level courses—which was deployed as an end of course assessment in the middle of the semester (end of DWRI0091) and end of the course (completion of DWRI0093). Scores of student performance in Criterion Online Writing Service were also collected and compared; however, results of these assessments are reported elsewhere.

The redesign was piloted in the Fall of 2007 with one section of DWRI 0091 linked to one section of DWRI 0093 for a cohort total of 19 students participating. The study was expanded in Fall 2008 to three sections of DWRI 0091 with a total of 67 students participating and three sections of DWRI 0093 with a total of 64 students participating. Full implementation of the course redesign to include all sections of DWRI 0091 and 0093 took place in the fall of 2009 with 8 sections of DWRI 0091 enrolling 182 students and 20 sections of DWRI 0093 enrolling 429 students.

Results

The Fall 2007 pilot semester exceeded the targeted measures (80% success rate & 90% retention rate) by achieving 90% success and 95% retention rates. The table below presents student success and pass rates for the developmental writing courses involved in the redesign (DWRI 0091 and 0093) for the last four semesters.

Table. Success and Retention Rates for Redesign Course and Traditional Courses

	Redesign				Traditional Format			
Term	DWRI 0091		DWRI 0093		DWRI 0091		DWRI 0093	
	Success	Retention	Success	Retention	Success	Retention	Success	Retention
Fall 2007	90%	95%	85%	95%	68%	85%	55%	85%
	n =19		*n* =19		*n* =150		*n* =324	
Spring 2008	90%	90%	85%	95%	70%	78%	55%	80%
	n =19		*n* =20		*n* =126		*n* =192	
Fall 2008	85%	100%	75%	92%	75%	92%	65%	92%
	n =67		*n* =64		*n* =110		*n* =359	
Spring 2009	85%	95%	73%	93%	65%	93%	62%	91%
	n =19		*n* =53		*n* =130		*n* =214	
Fall 2009	86%	95%	76.5%	94%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	n = 182		*n* = 429					

Success and retention rates in the redesigned course held steady from Fall 2007 through Spring 2008. They remained strong in DWRI 0091 during Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, but dipped in DWRI 0093 during those semesters. This is likely due to increased class size and the expansion of the redesign program to include the use of new instructors unpracticed in teaching technology-rich courses. However, when compared to the success and retention rates of the traditional, semester-long format of all other sections of DWRI 0091 and 0093, the results are more promising. Clearly the course redesign is having a positive impact on retention and success over the traditional instructional design and methods.

Implications and Future Directions

Because of the success of the redesign in increasing success and retention, all developmental writing 0091 and 0093 course sections are now offered in this format. Spurred by this systemic course redesign, the English Department is adding additional 8-week freshman composition courses to meet the anticipated growth in remediated students eligible to take required core English courses in the middle of the semester. Doing so will allow students who test into DWRI 0093 to complete it and their first semester of freshman composition in a single semester. Future research will track success and retention rates among that course sequence, as well as examine persistence to graduation among students who are accelerated through developmental writing in this manner.

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