Confidence Using Best Practices to Teach Writing: A Case Study of Community College Professors

SHARON J. KOCH
GOODWIN COLLEGE

The issue of preparation of the nation's student body has many facets, including the preparation of faculty charged with their instruction. This article reviews findings from a single-case study of community college English faculty members' perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) using best instructional practices, as identified by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE; 2009) to teach writing to underprepared students. The sample included 12 faculty members from a community college in a northeastern state. Seven of the 12 survey respondents also participated in an interview. Overall, the data indicated that faculty members were confident in using the practices. Some interview data did not reinforce survey data, providing a robust area for further consideration.

Individuals charged with the instruction of writing to underprepared students have a formidable task. The subject of remedial education in higher education is a controversial subject, often accompanied by finger pointing at secondary education, family support levels, or society in general. Questions remain as to the way we assess college readiness, and numerous initiatives are taking place throughout the country to address these topics. One topic that has not received considerable attention to date is the confidence level of English professors to carry out their instruction using recommended practices. If the professors are not sure how best to approach their task, their link in the education chain becomes weak.

Having identified this problem after an extensive literature review, I set out to do a case study to examine confidence levels in

using best practices to instruct underprepared students. To assess confidence levels, I designed a survey instrument and used in-person interviews to collect additional data. The sample included 12 faculty members from a community college in a northeastern state. Seven of the 12 survey respondents also participated in an interview. Overall, the data indicated that faculty members were confident in using the practices. Of note, some interview data did not reinforce survey data, providing a rich source of information for analysis.

This article reviews the major findings of this single-case study to explore and describe community college English faculty members' perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) using best instructional practices, as identified by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE, 2009) to teach students who are underprepared for college. More specifically, the focus was on using NADE's best instructional practices within the context of teaching basic writing. The concept of perceived self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997, p. 3) as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" in actions related to particular tasks in a specified domain and context. In practice, self-efficacy is analogous to a person's confidence level, acquired through various methods described in Bandura's theory. The study was guided by one primary research question: What are community college English faculty members' reports of self-efficacy using best instructional practices, as identified by NADE, to teach students who are underprepared for college?

The best instructional practices for developmental educators, as identified by NADE, were cultivated in a cooperative effort by developmental professionals across the nation. This process involved an extensive review of the literature, dissemination at national conferences, and field-testing. NADE's standards for best instructional practice "reflect the current knowledge and research of best practice in academic support and developmental education" (p. ix) and mirror those identified by other researchers (Boroch et al., 2010; Carnegie, 2008; Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Schwartz & Jenkins, 2007; Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004; Smittle, 2003).

The Mission and Role of Community Colleges

The primary mission of community colleges has been to offer universal access (Grimes & David, 1999) to higher education, effectively changing the way Americans have viewed college students. The ideology behind all community colleges is that they will be an integral part of their community, accept all students who desire higher education, and require minimal tuition. In terms of meeting this overarching mission, community colleges have shown success in eliminating or minimizing geographical and financial barriers. The downside associated with open access to a college education is that a large number of students fail to graduate, which serves neither the individual students nor the nation as a whole in preparing educated citizens for the workforce (Jez & Venezia, 2009).

Underprepared students constitute one of the most critical challenges facing community colleges today (Crews & Aragon, 2004; Levin & Calcagno, 2008). The two groups of stakeholders most closely involved in the issue of students who are underprepared are the students and the college faculty who teach them. Implications for students include success in meeting their academic and personal goals.

A study conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2009) revealed, among other key findings, that while 90% of entering students believed they have the motivation to succeed in college, a full 60% of them are required to enroll in at least one developmental course. Underprepared students do not have one uniform face; they are a diverse group including new high school graduates, displaced homemakers seeking to upgrade skills, unemployed persons trying to gain an edge in the job market, and immigrants who may possess the intellectual capacity to succeed, but not the language skills (Bailey, 2009). Although a negative stereotype exists to suggest that most students taking developmental courses in college are doing so because of inadequate secondary preparation, the research (Attewell, et al., 2006) points to broad issues that appear contradictory. Attewell et al. noted that 14% of developmental students took the most advanced curriculum in high school.

The Importance of Writing

Evidence of success in at least one English course is a requirement for every program of study offered in community colleges in the northeast state where the study was conducted. Furthermore, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employees (2010), solid communication skills appear repeatedly as a much sought after trait by employers. In order for community colleges to prepare students for the workforce, it is necessary to bring skill levels in English up to competency.

The research related to community college students, English, and developmental coursework is limited in terms of methodologically sound studies that thread the three components together (Bailey, 2009; Schwartz & Jenkins, 2007). Willingham and Price (2009) conducted a study of community college English faculty who teach vocabulary skills to underprepared students. Citing how a weak vocabulary compounds the other problems often faced by underprepared students, they explored different instructional strategies and concluded that a "superior teaching strategy does not exist" (p. 102). Willingham and Price further suggested that future research should focus on a wide variety of strategies.

The question remains as to whether community college English faculty members, the second major group of stakeholders affected by the issue of students who are underprepared, feel confident and capable in meeting the learning needs of these students. According to Murray (1999), "Many new faculty members will not arrive on campus with the knowledge required to be effective at working with a diverse student body" (p. 44). Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) asserted that educators need to know how to address the needs of their students. Faculty members need to believe that they possess the skills and abilities required to advance underprepared students from their entrance level to a point where the students are capable of college-level academic rigor. If they do not believe they are confident in their practice, their efforts may be negated by their own lack of confidence in meeting the demands of the job.

The recommended practices for working with underprepared

students, as detailed in NADE's self-evaluation guide (2009), serve to frame those responsibilities and define the actions and expected capabilities. Table 1 defines the five components for best instructional practices.

Table 1
Summary of Best Instructional Practices (NADE, 2009)

Components	Description
Student Outcomes	Evaluation and assessment processes (i.e., clarity in evaluation, variety in forms of assessment, timely and honest feedback) used by instructors (NADE, 2009).
Knowledge and Preparation	Essential and recommended pedagogical areas for instructors to hold strong competency in to achieve successful results with underprepared students (NADE, 2009).
Management of the Learning Environment	Essential and recommended ways for instructors to manage the course and class environment to achieve successful results with underprepared students (NADE, 2009).
Teaching Style	Instructors' methodological practices (i.e., philosophy of teaching, non-judgmental toward students, encourage inquiry, confident in role as a teacher) to achieve.
Teaching Process	Instructors' pedagogical beliefs and attitudes concerning how to achieve successful results with underprepared students (NADE, 2009)

Results

My analysis of the survey data yielded 39 findings, which were determined by item response rates. The interview data yielded 35

findings; a finding was generated when four or more interviewees provided an example of a given practice. Taken together, the study yielded 74 findings. Each set of results is presented by its NADE component.

Student Outcomes

Overall, survey respondents (N = 12) reported being almost always confident in using best instructional practices related to the student outcomes component (NADE, 2009). All survey respondents indicated that they were confident in their ability to evaluate student performance fairly, use a variety of methods to assess student learning, and provide timely, honest feedback regarding students' progress.

All interviewees (n = 7) described instances of applying instructional practices related to student evaluation and assessment processes (i.e., student outcomes component). Emerson shared how he allowed students the opportunity to improve their work in exchange for a higher grade.

Knowledge and Preparation

Overall, survey respondents (N = 12) reported being generally confident in using best instructional practices related to the knowledge and preparation component (NADE, 2009). All survey respondents indicated that they were confident in their knowledge of basic writing, assessment of students' prior knowledge, sequencing of learning tasks, current research, and new technologies. Additionally, survey respondents indicated that they were confident in their ability to engage in self-reflection, share instructional strategies with colleagues, know their limitations in meeting students' needs, be aware of campus resources, and be able to make appropriate referrals as necessary.

The observations regarding the need for referrals often tied in with their understanding of their limitations; six interviewees spoke candidly about their limitations in meeting student needs. Interview respondents often learned of dire circumstances through students' writing.

Celeste commented that she works with many students dealing with significant personal problems. Celeste asserted, "You can't learn if you're living in a car. You can't learn if you're getting beat up." She also spoke of a student sneaking into a church to sleep at night, "kids in and out of jail, or in and out of court" and how she was able to use her knowledge of resources to help in these situations.

Management of the Learning Environment

Overall, survey respondents (N = 12) reported being always confident in using best instructional practices related to the management of the learning environment component (NADE, 2009). All survey respondents indicated that they were confident in their ability to issue clear, understandable guidelines for learning, model professional and ethical standards, serve as a learning resource, and provide an environment that allows students to take risks and make mistakes. Five interviewees (n = 7) provided examples of how they create an environment that allows students to take risks and make mistakes. Jackie talked about how she holds group discussions in order to put students at ease in her class:

> We make sure that every single student is involved in the conversation. That's important. And we make sure that we prompt and let the kids talk, but we prompt and encourage and 'nobody's wrong' and all that respectful attitude kind of stuff. We do all of that.

Kenneth was insightful when he spoke of the importance of invoking critical thinking, but not in a way that puts students into a defensive posture. He said that "the only way really to have them adopt opinions or an approach that's on that mental level is think that they are not being made to look foolish or anything like that."

Teaching Style

Overall, survey respondents (N = 12) indicated that they were almost always confident in using best instructional practices related to the teaching style component (NADE, 2009). All survey respondents indicated that they were confident in the following areas of teaching style: their belief in their students' ability to learn, ability to be non-judgmental and respectful toward students, ability to encourage intellectual interactions through questioning,

ability to provide positive reinforcement, ability to demonstrate self-assurance, and ability to nurture students academically. Six interviewees (n = 7) provided examples of their belief in their students' ability to learn. Jackie spoke of her desire to help students, yet be mindful that the student has a responsibility to bear as well. She explained her view as follows:

> There's a lot of talk now about looking again at test scores and Accuplacer® scores, perhaps eliminating the bottom rung because some people think that some people aren't teachable. And that may be true, but [my co-teacher] and I were always on the page that we're going to do it. If the student is willing, we can help that student make progress. Usually, in my opinion anyway, what holds kids back is not their inability to progress, but their unwillingness to do the work. So, I mean . . . I can't do anything about that, if they don't show up, they drop out of class. Their body's present, but their mind's someplace else. Well, I'm not a miracle worker. I can't do anything with that. But I think that for the student who is willing, we can certainly move them along the path a little bit.

Teaching Process

Overall, survey respondents (N = 12) approached being always confident in using best instructional practices related to the teaching process component (NADE, 2009). All survey respondents indicated that they were confident in the following areas: their teaching process, including their ability to link learning activities to student learning objectives, vary teaching techniques, respond to a diverse student body, provide structured assignments, select an appropriate learning pace, be well-organized and well-prepared, help students learn organizational skills, demonstrate active listening, apply all levels of Bloom's taxonomy, provide instruction and practice in study strategies, promote transfer of learning, challenge students to learn, and foster collaborative learning. Four interviewees (n = 7) provided examples of how they challenge students to learn. Celeste illustrated the essence of how to do this though experiential learning that really "hooks" students into a holistic view of learning. She spoke of taking her developmental

writing students outdoors during a local music festival:

> So we talk about 'what is music.' You know, music is poetry. Music is communicating. We are able to talk about body language, the tune, the rhythm. There are a variety of ways of communicating. Even when you read . . . you read rhythmically.

Discussion

The importance of effectively teaching underprepared students the skills of basic writing cannot be overstated. Researchers (Maimon, 2002; Willingham & Price, 2009) have shown that students who do not possess strong mastery of reading and writing are less likely to be successful in postsecondary education. At the same time, employers demand a skilled, literate workforce (NACE, 2010). In order to connect workforce needs to learning outcomes in a collegiate setting, many students must first progress through one or more developmental English courses. It has been suggested that faculty members teaching developmental courses largely lack a comprehensive understanding of why they conduct their lessons in the manner that they do (NADE, 2009). Therefore, it would seem that faculty members who are confident in using the practices put forth by NADE should also garner a strong understanding of exactly how their actions might lead a student towards greater skill attainment. In the case of the study under review, faculty can best achieve this goal by reflecting on the areas where they tacitly acknowledge a lack of confidence.

In the main, faculty members participating in this study were confident in using best instructional practices as identified by NADE (2009). Nevertheless, the interviews did not always reinforce findings from the survey. For example, while nine survey respondents (N = 12) felt confident in linking learning activities to student learning objectives, only three interviewees provided examples of how they accomplished that in their courses. Similar discrepancies between the survey data and interview data occurred in the areas of assessing prior knowledge, selection of an appropriate learning pace, active listening behavior, use of current literature, inclusion of technology, effective use of questioning, and finally, application of all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The

significance for each of these seven areas is described in the NADE Self-Evaluation Guides (2009):

Assessment of Prior Knowledge.   NADE's (2009) best instructional practices related to knowledge and preparation emphasize assessment of prior knowledge.   Anderson (1981) suggested that prior knowledge is important for understanding and remembering new information. Bueschel (2008) highlighted listening to students as one method to learn about prior knowledge.

Selection of an Appropriate Learning Pace.   The pace of the learning should be selected in a manner appropriate to the subject topic, goals and objectives, and student readiness (NADE, 2009). Because assessing prior knowledge seems to have an important role in the manner in which faculty set the learning pace, faculty members need to be able to gauge it among their students and build upon it (Holmes & Rosser, 1987). Experiential learning techniques could be one way for faculty members to access students' prior knowledge. They provide a means by which students can begin to see how their past experiences can assist them in their efforts to assimilate new information.

Active Listening Behavior.   Bueschel (2008) stated that hearing about students' authentic experiences can provide faculty members with key knowledge. Faculty members should pay particular attention to their ability to listen to students as an overlooked means by which they might enhance underprepared students' experiences.

Use of Current Literature.   NADE (2009) encouraged the use of research in both content and pedagogy as a recommended practice. Given the information-rich environment in which higher education exists, accessing up-to-date research seems relatively easy to do. Perhaps the part-time status of the majority of faculty members in this study prevented them from being able to give full attention to the matter; additional information would be needed to understand the reasons. Another area of interest would be an investigation into why faculty members, who arrive with a very high level of education themselves, are not inclined to review current literature.

Use of Technology.   According to Schacter (1999), a large study carried out in 1994 by Kulik and Kulik in a postsecondary setting found that "students like their classes more and develop more positive attitudes when their classes include computer-based instruction" (p. 4). Given the popularity of technology (e.g., smart phones, netbooks), it would seem that technology-based instruction is an important tool for community college faculty members to embrace. In addition, due to the dynamic nature of technology, professional development might be an important consideration for administration.

Effective Questioning. Hannel (2009) stated that effective questioning can keep students interested, ultimately leading to greater student achievement. There are many basic tenets of questioning that serve to increase student engagement and learning, yet few teachers have been taught a practical pedagogy of questioning (Hannel, 2009). It would seem appropriate for professional development activities to include instruction in the art of inquiry so that faculty members could be both knowledgeable and confident when they employ those practices in the courses they teach.

Application of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Bloom's Taxonomy is a model for faculty members to consider the rigor of what they teach. It includes various levels of critical thinking, from a very basic level through a synthesis of ideas that require higher-ordered critical thinking skills. Schulman (2002) cautioned educators to avoid falling into the belief that following a certain order "was the only legitimate way to learn something" (p. 40). Still, the rigor that Bloom's Taxonomy puts forth serves as an important model for educators to consider as they reflect on their lessons. In a similar way, The Council of Writing Program Administrators, together with the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project (2011) developed a framework which recommends that teachers craft assignments that elicit critical thinking from students. The creators of the framework stress the importance of critical thinking through writing at the postsecondary level given the number of students being asked to "move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use writing to make sense of and respond to written, visual, verbal, and other texts that they encounter" (p. 7). It would seem

that their recommendations, along with the use of models such as Bloom's Taxonomy, should be taken into consideration by faculty members working with underprepared students.

In sum, there are many ways to improve learning outcomes for underprepared students. Targeting evidence-based areas, where faculty members have demonstrated a lack of confidence, would be a beneficial avenue of pursuit for professional development and scholarly investigation.

References

Anderson, J. R. (1981). Effects of prior knowledge on memory for new information. *Memory and Cognition, 9*(3), 237-246. Retrieved from: http://act-r.psy.cmu.edu/papers/59/MemCog81.pdf

Attewell, P., Lavin, D., Domina, T., & Levey, T.P. (2006). New evidence on college remediation. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77*(5), 886-924.

Bailey, T. (2009). Challenge and opportunity: Rethinking the role and function of developmental education in community college. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 145,* 11-30.

Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Boroch, D., Hope, L., Smith, B., Gabriner, R., Mery, P., Johnstone, R., & Asera, R. (2010). *Student success in community colleges: A practical guide to developmental education.* San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bueschel, A. C. (2008). A different way to think about developmental education: Listening to students about learning. (Report) Retrieved from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching website: http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/sites/default/files/publications/elibrary_pdf_737.pdf

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2008). Basic skills for complex lives: Designs for learning in the community college. A Report from Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC). Stanford, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Center for Community College Student Engagement (2009). Benchmarking & benchmarks: Effective practice with entering students. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.

Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. (1999). Development and adaptations of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 80,* 75-81.

Crews, D. M., & Aragon, S. R. (2004). Influence of a community college developmental education writing course on academic performance. *Community College Review, 32*(2), 1-18. doi:10.1177/009155210403200201.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Grimes, S. K., & David, K. C. (1999). Underprepared community college students: Implications of attitudinal and experiential differences. *Community College Review, 27,* 73-92.

Hannel, I. (2009). Insufficient questioning: Effective questioning can keep students interested and improve their learning. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*(3), 65-70.

Holmes, B. C., & Roser, N. L. (1987). Five ways to assess readers' prior knowledge. *The Reading Teacher, 40*(7), 646-649.

Jez, S., & Venezia, A. (2009). Looking ahead: Synthesizing what we know about national, regional, and local efforts to improve student preparation and success. N*ew Directions for Community Colleges, 145,* 103-106.

Koch, S. J. (2011). A Case Study of Community College Professors of English: Self-Efficacy Concerning Teaching Basic Writing to Underprepared Students. (Doctoral dissertation). Bloomfield, CT: University of Hartford.

Levin, H. M., & Calcagno, J. C. (2008). Remediation in the community college: An evaluator's perspective. *Community College Review, 35*(3), 181-207.

Maimon, L. (2002). The relationship between self-efficacy and the functions of writing. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 33,* 32-45.

Murray, J. P. (1999). Interviewing to hire competent community college faculty. *Community College Review, 27,* 41-56.

National Association of Colleges and Employees (NACE). 2010). Job outlook 2010: Fall report. Retrieved from: http://www.naceweb.org/research

National Association for Developmental Education (NADE). (2009). *Self-evaluation guides: Best practice in academic support programs* (2nd ed.). Clearwater, FL: H&H Publishing.

National Commission on Writing (NCW). (2004). Writing a ticket to work or a ticket out. Retrieved from: http://www.collegeboard.com/ prod_downloads/writingcom/ writing-ticket-to-work.pdf

National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). Policy research brief. Retrieved from: http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/ Resources/Magazine/Chron0908Policy_Writing_Now.pdf

Schacter, J. (1999). The impact of educational technology on student achievement: What the most current research has to say. CA: Milken Exchange on Education Technology. Retrieved from: http://www.mff.org/pubs/ME161.pdf

Schulman, L. S. (2002). Making a difference: A table of learning. *Change*, 37- 44.

Schwartz, W., & Jenkins, D. (2007). Promising practices for community college developmental education. Paper presented to the Connecticut Community College System.

Simpson, M. L., Stahl, N. A., & Francis, M. A. (2004). Reading and learning strategies: Recommendations for the 21st century. *Journal of Developmental Education, 28(2)*.

Smittle, P. (2003). Principles for effective teaching. *Journal of Developmental Education, 26(3)*. Retrieved from: http://www. ncde.appstate.edu/resources/reports/documents/V26-3smittle. htm

Willingham, D., & Price, D. (2009). Theory to practice vocabulary instruction in community college developmental education reading classes: What the research tells us. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 40(3)*, 91-102.

Dr. Sharon Koch is the coordinator of academic progress at Goodwin College in East Hartford, Connecticut.