Leading Thirsty Horses to Water

M. Therese Gallegos

University of Texas at Brownsville & Texas Southmost College

This article addresses the concern many instructors have about students who do not complete assigned work, particularly the reading. The author explains briefly why extensive reading is so important in developmental writing classes and discusses a multi-step approach she has been using successfully for years. A list of short novels and stories recommended for use in developmental writing courses is included in the Appendix.

Several years ago at an English department meeting, we were discussing the problem of getting students to do the assigned reading. One instructor said that it was like "leading a horse to water: you can't make him drink." This instructor's solution to the problem was simply to not assign any readings. "Why bother?" he asked. "They're not going to do it anyway."

Perhaps we can't make our students work any more than we can make a horse drink. But if the water looks clean and fresh and if the horse is thirsty enough before it gets to the water, it will drink. And we can get our students to read.

Although as an English teacher my principal responsibility is to teach writing, I believe, especially in my developmental writing classes, that one of the most important things I do is help my students become better readers. I won't review the literature on the importance of reading, particularly as it relates to writing; that's the topic of another paper. (For example, see Stotsky's 1984 "Research on reading/writing relationships" for a discussion of the topic and related literature.) However, I will present my main arguments for requiring extensive reading in a writing course.

Most important, students' ability to read forms a "ceiling" for their ability to write; they can't write better than they read. So, if they can't read, you can't teach them to write no matter what you do.

In addition, what students can learn consciously about writing is limited (albeit, important); most of what they need to know about writing, (e.g., punctuation, spelling, syntax, and vocabulary) is best learned subconsciously through reading. Becoming a better writer is the almost inevitable consequence of extensive reading (Krashen, 1983; Krashen, 1989).

Another reason writing students need to read is so that they have something to write about. If they aren't being exposed to new ideas, they are forced to write about what they already know and generally already have opinions about, so their writing requires little or no critical thinking.

Finally, in college-level courses, most writing is reading-based, and our developmental writing courses need to prepare them for such tasks.

While it may be obvious that the best way to improve the reading ability of developmental writing students is to require extensive reading, simply *requiring* reading isn't enough. Developmental students lack many skills, including, in some cases, intellectual discipline; many have learned to give up as soon as an academic task becomes difficult. (This is not to say that our students are lazy: many work full time, have children, and care for aging relatives.) Therefore, the job of the English teacher is not just to require reading but to find a way to make students do it.

Journal Assignment

Like many teachers, I have always required that my students keep a journal, which, over the 16 years that I have taught developmental writing, has evolved from a minor task of minimal importance to the very cornerstone of my course. The multi-step approach that I use today has increased both the amount of assigned reading and the number of students who actually do the work. This approach consists of several steps, all of which are necessary for any one of them to be effective:

Step 1. Assign large amounts of interesting, relatively easy reading –primarily short novels and stories. Few developmental students can force themselves to read something that they find too hard, too long, or too boring.

For a list of titles appropriate for low-level developmental writing students, or even advanced ESL students, see the Appendix.

Step 2. Have students keep a journal in which they briefly summarize each story or essay and answer questions about it.

At some point very early in the semester, the teacher needs to show students how to do a summary, perhaps by asking them, as a group, to summarize a story they've already read. I do this by letting them dictate a summary to me. I write this on the board, providing feedback along the way so that they end up with a model summary.

Step 3. Quiz students at least once a week on the assigned reading, allowing them to use their journal but not the textbook with the assigned readings. In this way, students' reading, critical thinking, and note-taking skills are being developed, tested, and rewarded—not their memory.

Step 4. Collect the quizzes along with their journals after a reasonable amount of time and go over the quiz immediately. In general, don't give the answers; allow them to come out of class discussion even if the students need to use their books. Be reasonable about accepting alternative answers if the students can make a clear case, based on the reading (not on some logic external to the story). Their answer should show that they've read and understood the story. It is through this discussion–often heated, with students passionately defending their interpretation of a passage–that those who did not do the work realize that the assigned readings are interesting.

To prevent cheating, don't use the same quiz for multiple sections. Doing so encourages cheating; students from your earlier class will pass the information on to the later class. You might think you can prevent cheating by not going over the answers in the earlier class, but this would decrease the effectiveness of the activity.

To make the quiz more interesting for the stronger students, include at least one difficult bonus question. In this way you can challenge students without penalizing those who lack the intellectual or linguistic skills to "get" the hard questions. Furthermore, difficult questions stimulate the best class discussion, often from students who otherwise don't bother to speak up.

Finally, don't accept the quiz without the journal or the journal without the quiz. This discourages cheating. Those who copied someone else's journal assignment without having read the stories usually can't pass the quiz. I will, however, accept the journal early from students who know in advance that they won't be present the day that journals are due.

Step 5. Collect and grade journals every week, not at the end of the semester. To do a good job, students need feedback, especially at first, when you truly need to read the journals. Give feedback on content, not sentence mechanics; mark answers that are wrong, point out problems with the summary, (e.g., inaccuracies or too many/few details), and sometimes just comment on what they've written.

To keep the grading of journals from being too much work, the instructor needs to come up with a simple system. Don't grade or even mark the errors in mechanics. In my classes, students who make an honest effort (doing all the summaries and answering most of the questions) get full credit—10 points for the weekly assignment, with bonus points possible if readings are particularly long. (I generally assign 3 stories per week, with each story being worth 3 or 4 points, for a total of 10 points.)

Step 6. Make the grade matter. In my classes, students must have an average of at least 60 percent on both the journal assignments and reading quizzes in order to earn a C or higher in the course. (In a typical semester, all students who make an honest effort meet this standard.)

Conclusion

Since I've started using this approach, most of my students do the assigned work–both the reading and the journal writing. As I lug stacks of journals to class on Wednesday (I always return them the very next class day), I might grumble to other English teachers I pass in the hall, but that's only so that they can't see me gloat, especially when they say that none of their students turned in their work. That doesn't happen in my writing classes any more.

So maybe we can't "make 'em drink," but with the right approach, most of them will.

References

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