Research-Based Integrated Reading and Writing Course Development

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With the continuing national emphases on acceleration and completion, an integrated reading and writing course (a combined developmental reading and developmental writing course, with all levels compressed into a single course) is one way to move students more quickly and efficiently through the developmental sequence while still maintaining standards of good instruction. Reading, Reasoning, and Writing, the course designed in this 2011-2012 practicum project, drew on recommended instructional practices for developmental education and principles of adult learning theory such as active learning, collaborative learning, mastery learning, contextual learning, and learning community design (Baker, Hope, & Karandjeff, 2009; Boroch et al., 2010; Boylan & Saxon, 2012; Schwartz & Jenkins, 2007; Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004). Today, the course, now named Integrated Reading and Writing, is still an integral part of BridgeValley Community and Technical College's curriculum.

Background

The project to design a research-based integrated reading and writing course began in 2011, at a time when developmental educators across the nation were scrambling to respond creatively to challenges from legislators and the general public about the need for an effectiveness of developmental education. Among many others, philanthropist Melinda Gates was calling for innovation in developmental education and stated, "Our research indicates that improving remediation is the single most important thing community colleges can do to increase the number of students who graduate" (Gonzalez, 2010). With this goal in mind, developmental education professionals had been experimenting with a number of methods to accelerate developmental education instruction effectively. One method that had gained widespread attention was the combination of developmental reading and writing courses. However, little research existed at that time to demonstrate an effective course design or even to indicate whether such as approach was successful with college students.

Problem Statement

Although research had documented that developmental education was not as effective as it should be, current studies and experimentation by institutions in the 2011-2012 practicum time period continued to center upon various methods of acceleration. Within this focus, however, principles of instructional design sometimes moved away from best practices related to adult learning theory. The best-designed course cannot be effective without instructional strategies that address student learning needs.

Method

This practicum focused on the development of a combined reading and writing course. It drew on recommended instructional practices for developmental education and on principles of adult learning theory such as active learning, collaborative learning, mastery learning, contextual learning, and learning community design.

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Population

The population for the study was the 2011-2012 academic year cohort of developmental education students at Kanawha Valley [now Bridge Valley] Community & Technical College (KVCTC). The sample for the practicum was a group of students enrolled in a grant-funded learning community at the institution called Green Basics during the Fall 2011 semester. The 12 students, who self-selected the learning community schedule, were coenrolled in several courses: Introduction to Green Technology, College 101, Pre-Algebra, and the combined reading and writing course pilot. The researcher/course designer had not planned to teach the pilot, initially, but became the instructor due to a last minute scheduling issue.

The revised Reading, Reasoning, and Writing course was also piloted with a sample of twelve students from the total population of developmental education students at KVCTC, during the Spring 2012 semester, also taught by the researcher/course designer. These twelve students also self-selected the combined developmental reading and developmental writing course;

however, the revised Reading, Reasoning, and Writing course was not part of a larger learning community.

Project Goals

Goals for the study included (a) designing a research-based combined developmental reading and developmental writing course and (b) performing a formative evaluation of the course when it was piloted. These two goals were divided into four objectives:

1. Research best practices in instructional design and teaching of developmental reading and writing.
2. Use research-based best practices to design a combined reading and writing course.
3. Perform qualitative and quantitative formative evaluation of the combined reading and writing course when it is piloted.
4. Recommend revisions to the course based upon analysis.

Best Practices

The first objective was to research best practices in instructional design and teaching of developmental reading and writing. The instructional practices examined for this practicum certainly related to broad topics in adult learning theory such as metacognition, self-regulation and self-monitoring, andragogy, active learning, social or collaborative learning, and other areas related to student learning. However, the researcher also examined best practices in instruction specifically identified for developmental education. Important sources that provided a framework for the design of the combined reading and writing course included best practices in learning and developmental education from Boylan (2002); Smittle (2003); Simpson, Stahl, and Francis (2004); Massachusetts Community Colleges Executive Office (2006), Sperling (2009); and the California Community College Basic Skills Initiative (Boroch et al., 2010). Adult learning theory information came from Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) and Silverman and Casazza (2000). Contextual learning discussions were drawn from Perin (2011) and Imel (2000). Many other useful and pertinent sources were consulted.

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Instructional Design

The second objective was to use the research-based best practices identified to design a combined reading and writing course. Many of these practices were included in the learning outcomes, whereas others appeared in varied instructional activities. Specifically, the combined course featured contextual learning activities, collaborative learning activities, active learning, and limited use of computer-assisted tutorials that employed mastery learning. For instance, students were placed in collaborative groups to preview an article, develop questions to guide their reading, read the text, and then answer the questions they had written. Afterwards, groups reported back to the class as a whole on one of their questions and answers.

Instructional activities were designed to increase metacognitive self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and self-perception, self-regulation and goal setting, critical thinking skills, and learning strategies. Typically, at least one unit of readings and corresponding writing topics in a course were contextualized to the topic of college learning; for example, students viewed a video on Duckworth's Grit TED Talks (2013) along with an excerpt from Dweck's Mindset (2007) and a contrasting short article from Steel (2011).

The instructor also employed classroom assessment techniques (particularly metacognitive activities designed to help students understand how to evaluate their own learning), frequent testing (evaluation of individual student learning rather than actual "tests," in this context), and frequent and timely feedback. For instance, students were asked to write goals for the course after completing readings and discussion on the topic of goal-setting. A few weeks later, they revisited their composition and evaluated their performance to date then adjusted goals, or their approach to reaching the goals, as appropriate.

Results and Discussion

The third objective was to perform qualitative and quantitative formative evaluation of the combined reading and writing course. For the first pilot section in the Fall 2011 semester, the researcher used the following self-rated qualitative methods: students' assessment of reading habits, students' perceptions of themselves as writers, and students' writing fears (response to a prompt). All students who completed these measures rated themselves more highly at the end of the semester; however, the measures were not especially useful for overall course evaluation. For the second pilot in Spring 2012, the students completed multiple qualitative reflections during class that were designed to facilitate metacognitive strategy building. These measures indicated a growing maturity in self-regulation, self-assessment, critical thinking, and goal setting skills, along with many other areas.

For both semesters of the pilot, all students who persisted to the end of the semester demonstrated marked improvements in their pre- and post-benchmark essays. For this measure, students were asked to write an essay during class time at the beginning of the semester, choosing from four possible prompts (topics). At the end of the semester, each student's essay was returned, and the students were asked to revise and edit the original essay during class time. Students improved in all areas: purpose, content (development), organization, style, and mechanics. Students in the second cohort also demonstrated marked improvements in all areas of their pre- and postbenchmark essays as well as notable improvement in their ability to assess their own skill levels.

Quantitative measures used (in addition to grade-related materials) were pre- and post-MyWritingLab (a Pearson product) diagnostics. The overall MyWritingLab diagnostic scores include four categories: sentence grammar, punctuation and mechanics, usage and style, and basic grammar. The scores in all categories as well as the overall scores improved both semesters (dramatically, in many cases). In Fall 2011, the overall MyWritingLab diagnostic scores moved from a class average of 56 on the pretests to a class average of 75 on a scale of 100 possible on the posttests. In Spring 2012, the overall diagnostic scores on the writing pretest moved from a class average of 59 on the pretests to a class average of 82 on a scale of 100 possible on the posttests.

An important measure for the researcher was overall student course passage, or the student success rate. In the Fall 2011 semester, 75% of students passed with a grade of C or better, and the student success percentage for the Spring 2012 semester was 82%. These success rates compare favorably with the previous year's KVCTC passage rates reported in the West Virginia Higher Education Report Card (2011) for first-time freshmen of 43.2% in writing and 42.5% in reading. A comparable local institution, Mountwest Community & Technical College, posted a passage rate of 54.4% in writing and 36.1% in reading.

The fourth objective was to recommend revisions of the course based upon this analysis. The researcher made several major changes based upon various assessment methods, abandoning the accelerated 12-week format, the scheduled supplemental instruction, and the situation of the course in a learning community context. First, students expressed their dislike of

the accelerated format in a qualitative survey, and the instructor observed that students in the second full-semester course expressed experiencing far less stress related to assignments since they had more time to complete them. The second major change was to delete the mandatory supplemental instruction component since no students stated in the qualitative survey that they found this service to be helpful. Finally, the researcher did not observe that the learning community of five classes added anything to the student experience that a learning community of two courses (the combined course) would not, and therefore reduced the number of courses.

Students in the second cohort (the combined class without the other learning community courses) were retained at a higher rate than those in the first cohort; in fact, of the nine students who persisted until the end of the semester, the lowest attendance rate was 92%, with six students attending 98% or 100% of scheduled class meetings. Other smaller changes to the course were an increased usage of student reflection to build metacognition, a more succinct expression of course learning outcomes (twenty rather than sixty), and even more integration of reading, writing, and critical thinking instruction and application.

Limitations

The study of the effectiveness of the designed course examined the perceptions of a limited population of participants. In addition, the study measured content proficiency quantitatively without a control group, so that the data could not be generalized to any type of larger group. The study also asked student perceptions as to course effectiveness; as with any qualitative data, truthfulness of participants is a potential limitation, and a social desirability factor may lend bias to answers. Since the researcher/course designer also taught both the original and the redesigned course, bias was also a potential factor with instructor perceptions of effectiveness.

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Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

The course designed for this practicum was adopted by the college and continues to be taught each semester in multiple sections for students who place low in both reading and writing skills (ACT scores below Reading 15 and Writing 16; or ACCUPLACER scores below Reading Comprehension 60 and Sentence Skills 66). Originally a 6-credit course, the current 3-credit course now forms a 2-semester pathway with English Composition I for students required to take it. The English Department experimented with other modalities such as an IRW course corequisite with English Composition I and an 8 weeks/8 weeks delivery of IRW followed by English Composition I. These modifications were unsuccessful because they did not allow the time for affective and metacognitive skill development embedded in the practicum-designed course.

Of course, integrated reading and writing courses have grown in popularity since the completion of this practicum project in 2012. Many have developed or expanded via outstanding professional development offered by Katie Hern of the California Acceleration Project (2017), particularly in association with the Conference on Acceleration in Developmental Education, developed and popularized by Peter Adams at the Community College of Baltimore County (Accelerated Learning Program, n.d.).

Localized benefits of this research-based combined reading and writing course at the researcher's institution that may apply to other institutions adopting the design include increased student success in developmental education and improved teaching and instructional design practices in developmental reading and writing. At the time of the practicum, the researcher concluded that further study was needed to determine whether and to what degree the benefits of improved student success and student retention generalize to a larger population of students. In addition, the instructor utilized specific instructional techniques based upon research and chosen to facilitate student learning, as described previously. Further study must be undertaken to determine whether these instructional practices actually demonstrate a measurable, significant correlation with student learning.

Conclusion

Overall, the practicum project was a good experience for the researcher/teacher and students involved and a positive addition to the institution's course listing. The varied instructional activities were valuable components of the course, particularly those designed to increase metacognitive self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and self-perception, self-regulation and goal setting, critical thinking skills, and learning strategies. Both the researcher/instructor's perceptions and the students' survey responses indicated that the integrated reading and writing activities enriched the students' learning in both areas (Pierce, 2012).

The Integrated Reading and Writing course researched, created, taught, and revised for the practicum was demonstrably successful in the context where it was offered, with the course passage rates of the first two semesters (75% and 82%, respectively) climbing to almost twice those of the separate developmental reading and developmental writing passage rates of the previous academic year (43%). This course continues to be promote student success in college reading, writing, and critical thinking. However, the larger lesson may be that any course, accelerated, combined, or otherwise, based upon a firm foundation of learning theory and taught by an experienced, committed instructor will likely be a success.

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NADE News: President's Goals for NADE

By Robin Ozz President, National Association for Developmental Education

As I begin the last year of my tenure as President of NADE, there are three goals I have for NADE and what it will offer its members. I want you to feel...

Connected.

Through the newsletters and the Board's increased attendance at chapter meetings, we have begun to work on this goal, but our work on making our members feel connected to the national organization and to each other will continue. We do not underestimate the value of having someone who understands the often humbling and lonely road developmental educators sometimes have to walk. We want our members to know your Executive Board, your Chapter leaders, and your colleagues are here for you.

To that end, we are focusing on holding regional conferences in addition to the annual conference so more people can meet, network, and learn. We are also going to focus more on our listserv which you can join at nade-discussion-forum@thenade.org and encourage you to join our Facebook page. Search for @nade.DevEd to find us.

Protected.

By protected, I mean that you do not have to stand alone when you are questioned about your curriculum, programs, or developmental education as a field. Sometimes when people are peppering you with questions asking you to justify your position, it is hard to come up with ready answers. That is when we can come in. Your Executive Board can refer you to research and resources, and, if you wish, we can conference with you or write to legislators or administrators. We are here to help you and protect you. Call on us.

Respected.

Above all, please know that we as your board, and I as your president, respect you for all that you are and all that you do. Most of your working days you may go unnoticed, feeling as if you are working in a thankless job often for little pay and recognition. But always remember you are working for the outcomes, not the income; you are the one your students will remember in the future as having made a difference in their lives. In this accelerated world it is easy to skip appreciation and fail to express gratitude; let me take this time to tell you how much you are appreciated now and every day!

NADE: Helping underprepared students prepare, prepared students advance, and advanced students excel!
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