Efficacy of a College Reading Strategy Course: Comparative Study

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In 1989, USI (University of Southern Indiana) took part in a U.S. Department of Education survey of American Colleges and Universities and developmental education. According to the statistics in the *Academic Skills Annual Reports* (Smith, 1989-1999), the national completion rate for developmental coursework in reading in 1989 was 77%. USI's completion rate in reading was 81%. Over the next 6 years, USI's reading completion rate averaged 79%. In 1995, the U. S. Department of Education updated the survey and determined the national completion rate to be 82%. USI's reading completion rate slipped to 69%.

In 1999, a decision was made to add an additional developmental reading course through Academic Skills: GENS 151: Academic Reading Strategies. This three-hour credit course counted towards graduation as general elective credit, and students who placed into it were encouraged to enroll in it; however, it was still not mandatory. The GENS 151 course is designed to help students improve their textbook reading comprehension by learning and applying strategies and techniques needed to read and understand college-level textbook material successfully as well as to encourage them to become strategic learners and readers. Students receive a grade and are considered successful if they obtain an A, B, or C. Students are encouraged to enroll in a reading-intensive course (i.e., history, sociology, biology) as a companion for immediate transfer and application of reading strategies. After almost a decade implementing GENS 151 the outcomes had not been evaluated.

A summer in Boone, North Carolina in 2008 at the Kellogg Institute offered an opportunity to more fully explore and develop appropriate evaluation procedures for the developmental reading courses: GENS 151: Academic Reading Strategies. Although the reading program at the USI collected qualitative and quantitative data at the primary level for several years, a gap in data collection existed for one very important criteria: The percentage of students who passed the highest level developmental course who also took and passed the next level curriculum course in that subject. Such data would offer information regarding the relationship between participation in the first course and the student performance (grade) of the second course, and thus substantiate the efficacy of the first course. The challenge to evaluate the efficacy of the GENS 151 course provided the focus of the practicum project.

Practicum Implementation

USI is a mid-western four-year comprehensive public university located in Evansville, Indiana, with over just 10,000 students. The university's learning assistance center, Academic Skills, began offering learning assistance to USI students in 1983 through writing and math tutoring followed in 1989 with tutoring in reading and study skills. Three noncredit developmental courses were also offered: math (GENS 097), English (GENS 098), and reading (GENS 099). Incoming freshmen who placed into the developmental math and English courses were required to enroll in the respective courses; however, students were not required to follow their reading placement. Historically, 20% of incoming freshmen place into developmental reading, 20% in English, and 50% in math.

Were students transferring and applying the study/reading strategies taught in GENS 151?

How effective was the GENS 151 course? Were students transferring and applying the study/reading strategies taught in GENS 151? Students had self-reported that they were using the strategies and that this had impacted their grade in a reading-intensive Core course, but quantitative data had not been collected. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to do a comparative study of students who enrolled in, completed, and were successful in GENS 151 and passed a reading intensive course with students who did not take their reading placement in GENS but took the same reading intensive course. Since USI students are required to complete the University Core Curriculum (UCC), the target course used for comparison was selected from one of the Core courses.

In an effort to determine the best course of action and study design, a review of the current research and theory was conducted. Maxwell (1997) has stated that the purpose of evaluation, "should be to help people and programs improve, and it is a necessary tool for managerial decision-making" (p. 308). A program cannot improve unless there is direct measurement of the effectiveness of a program and its outcomes. Furthermore, Casazza and Silverman (1996) have suggested that the key to a program's success is a "disciplined approach to program evaluation" (p. 84).

Although researchers have noted that evaluation is essential (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, & Davis, 2007; Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004), evaluation of developmental programs in a systematic way has not always been the norm. Boylan (2002) found that developmental programs that conduct "regular and systematic evaluation" are more successful than programs that do it intermittently or not at all. In addition to systematic evaluation, Boylan, Bonham, White, and George (2000) posited that evaluation should be multifaceted and include data at three levels: primary (i.e., number of developmental courses or services offered, number of students enrolled or served), secondary (i.e., short-term outcomes such as course completion rates, grades and semester-to-semester retention), and tertiary (i.e., long-term outcomes such as grade point averages and graduation rates).

Boylan and Bonham (2008) have recommended that, "particular attention be paid to the criteria of grades in follow-up courses, course completion rates, and 'serendipitous benefits.' If a reading and study strategy program is designed to improve student performance, its effectiveness can be best measured by assessing the grades students receive in subsequent reading-oriented courses. If students who complete the program tend to do well in later courses requiring advanced reading skills, the program has accomplished its objective" (p. 397). And Smittle (2003) has concurred: "One measure of a successful developmental education program is the success of the students in subsequent courses" (p. 5).

Many postsecondary skills-development courses taught strategies in isolation and failed to emphasize transfer of skills to actual coursework. Researchers contend that, "It is the degree to which students use the skills that determines their achievement" (Gebelt, Parilis, Kramer & Wilson, 1996, p. 2). Simpson (2002) has suggested that many reading program evaluation studies have overlooked questions which address the transfer and modification of strategies to discipline-specific tasks. Other researchers concur that it is not enough that students may learn strategies in a reading course. "Unless students transfer the strategies – successfully adapt and use the strategies gained in the reading class in content area courses and beyond – the reading course is of little use" (McGrath & Hamer, 2007, p. 11).

Prior to this study, baseline data for determining the efficacy of the GENS 151 course had not been established.

Developmental reading courses that use specific content-area reading skills and whose reading specialists interact closely with discipline-specific faculty improve student learning (Cox, Friesner, & Khayum, 2003, p. 191). Additionally, content-area instructors who teach strategies such as utilizing study guides and graphic organizers, and who discuss the differences between literal and inferential meaning in course textbooks (Bickley, Davis & Anderson, 2001; Brothen & Wambach, 2000), found that students increased their success in the course as they relied less on surface reading.

Goals, Objectives, and Findings

The review of literature provided the underpinnings on which to base the design and objectives of the practicum. The evaluations of the objectives as well as the long-term impact of the practicum are detailed in the following.

Objective 1: To meet with Institutional Research to determine a possible target course for use in comparison groups based on enrollment figures.

Result: The Institutional Research department provided a list of all students who completed GENS 151 or were recommended to take GENS 151 but did not and their enrollment in University Core Curriculum courses during Fall 2007/Spring 2008. The data contained UCC course enrollments for those students who enrolled in GENS 151 and successfully completed it; UCC course enrollments for those students who enrolled in GENS 151 and did not successfully complete the course; and UCC course enrollments for students who placed into 151 but did not take it. HIST 102 and BIOL 105 were considered possible target courses to examine transfer of strategies.

Objective 2: To select a target course based on the following criteria:

- Determine whether or not a course is reading intensive through examination of the syllabus and exam.
- Determine the readability of text to be 13th grade level.

Result: Based upon an analysis of the syllabi and textbook, it was determined that the BIOL 105 course met the criteria and would be a good fit as the target course for the comparative study. The disparity in types of assessments used among the different sections of the HIST 102 course would have made it difficult to determine how much successful reading impacted student performance.

Objective 3: To conduct a retrospective comparative study by collecting quantitative data that showed success (C or better) in the following student groups:

- Students who placed into and took GENS 151 and the target course within 2 semesters.
- Students who placed into but didn't take GENS 151 and still took the target course within 2 semesters.

Result: The Institutional Research department researched BIOL 105, and 6 semesters of data were collected. Freshmen cohorts who entered the university and completed both fall and spring semesters in the following three academic years were included in the comparative analysis: Fall 2005/Spring 2006, Fall 2006/Spring 2007, and Fall 2007/Spring 2008. The success in BIOL 105 of students who placed into and completed GENS 151 successfully (C or better) and either co-enrolled in BIOL 105 or took it in the spring semester was compared to the success of students from the same cohort in BIOL 105 who placed into but did not enroll in GENS 151. Of the 39 students who placed into and completed GENS 151 successfully (C or better) and either co-enrolled in BIOL 105 or took it the following semester, 24 (62%) earned a C or better in BIOL 105 and were considered successful and 15 (38%) were considered unsuccessful. In comparison, of the 44 students who placed into GENS 151 but did not enroll in GENS 151, only 22 (50%) were considered to have completed BIOL 105 successfully and 22 (50%) did not.

Objective 4: To determine if the current delivery method and curriculum of the GENS 151 course was having a positive impact on the students who take it.

Result: Students who took both GENS 151 and BIOL 105 were more successful than students who had not taken GENS 151. Since the data analyzed was from students who either took BIOL 105 concurrently or in the subsequent semester, the results indicated that short-term transferability of strategies may have occurred. As reported earlier, many students had self-reported that they were using the strategies in their college-level core classes, but the findings of this study indicated that the delivery and use of these strategies may have had a positive correlation on their academic performance.

Objective 5: To establish a baseline for regular and systematic research and evaluation in order to determine whether the educational goals and needs of the students have been met.

Result: Prior to this study, baseline data for determining the efficacy of the GENS 151 course had not been established. With the successful completion of this practicum, 3 years of outcomes measures had been obtained and analyzed. These formed the baseline for comparing future outcomes.

Practicum Impact

The practicum, as well as the Kellogg Institute experience, has had long-term impact on the reading program at USI. Since the completion of the practicum, reading became a mandatory placement at USI in Fall 2009 for both of the developmental reading courses (GENS 099 and 151). The data collected has become part of an ongoing, systematic evaluation plan for the reading program. In addition, a conscious effort has been made to include more quantitative data for each criterion of the "industry standard." Work continues with colleagues in the Institutional Research department to provide accurate, timely data. An annual Reading Program Review is conducted that includes data on all three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Serendipitous benefits of the initial practicum are evident. Communication to the USI community through a biannual *Reading @USI* newsletter is disseminated as part of a PR (Promote Reading) Campaign. Ongoing dialogue with the faculty has promoted confidence in the reading program and increased faculty awareness of effective strategies that promote reading and learning in the college classroom. Requests to conduct reading /study strategy presentations to students in core courses have multiplied over the years. The Kellogg Institute philosophy of "think grand, but act incrementally" has proven overtime to be of great value to USI's reading program.

The Kellogg Institute philosophy of "think grand, but act incrementally" has proven over time to be of great value.

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