Integrating Reading and Writing Instruction in an Accelerated Curriculum: An Interview with Katie Hern

By Norman A. Stahl

The changes within the field of developmental education across the past decade have been nothing short of a pedagogical tsunanmi.

Katie Hern is an English Instructor at Chabot College and Co-Founder of the California Acceleration Project (CAP), a professional development network that supports the state's 113 community colleges to transform remediation and increase student completion and equity. Hern speaks nationally on remediation reform and integrated reading and writing. Her publications focus on the need to rethink placement, design principles for teaching accelerated English and math, pedagogy for integrated reading and writing, and the equity imperative of transforming remediation. Along with CAP Co-Founder Myra Snell, Hern was named to the Washington Monthly's *"16 Most Innovative People in Higher Education" in 2016. Hern began teaching English composition at Bowling Green State University in 1991. Her past roles include serving as Co-Director of California's Faculty Inquiry Network and Dean of Academic Affairs for John F. Kennedy University. She holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Mills College.*

Norman A. Stahl (N. A. S.): The changes within the field of developmental education across the past decade have been nothing short of a pedagogical tsunami. You have been at the forefront of the movement to create accelerated models of developmental education. What led you down this path in the first place?

Katie Hern (K. H.): In 2005, I became involved in a statewide grant project focused on developmental education that included 13 colleges from around California, and when we got together, each college would present on their programs. That's when I first became aware that other colleges had really

long developmental sequences. City College of San Francisco (CCSF) had–I believe–seven levels of developmental English at the time. I was surprised and a little confused by this approach.

At Chabot we had just two levels, and any student could self-place into an accelerated, four-unit class one level below college English. My department believes that developmental courses should require the same kinds of work as is required in college composition but with more guidance and scaffolding. Students read a lot, engage in higher order thinking, and write text-based academic synthesis essays. I was teaching these classes. I knew the students. I knew their reading and writing. And I couldn't understand why, just across the San Francisco Bay, CCSF students would need up to 3½ years of remediation to become ready for college English. It was around this time that I became aware that what we were doing at Chabot wasn't the norm and that at many colleges developmental classes emphasized decontextualized skill instruction, using textbooks called "from the sentence to the paragraph."

It was through this statewide grant that I met Myra Snell, a math instructor at Los Medanos College with whom I would later cofound the California Acceleration Project. Myra was the person who taught me that every remedial course in the student's path substantially reduces the chances of completing a college-level class, and therefore a degree. I remember the moment I first understood this. Myra and I were on the phone, and I flat out didn't believe her. I assured her that this was not true for the learning community I had developed. My program was getting much better results.

"Okay," she said. "Take out your calculator. Let's go through a thought experiment. What if you get 80% to pass that first class?" This was much higher than the actual pass rate in my course, but I typed .8 into the calculator. "Then let's say your persistence was really very good, and you got 90% of your students to enroll in the next class. Multiply 80% by 90%." We went through different scenarios, calculating what percent of the original group was going to complete that last course in the sequence, and it was shocking. With

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every course, the percentage of the original group became smaller – a lot smaller. I remember asking, "Are you sure this is right?"

After that, I started to really dig into the data from my own college, comparing outcomes for students who started in our accelerated class versus the students who took our 2-semester developmental path. Chabot had been offering the accelerated course for about 15 years at the time, and the data were incredibly consistent. For every cohort I examined, students who took the accelerated course were 20 to 25 percentage points more likely to complete college English than students who took the 2-semester path. That's when I started making presentations and writing about acceleration (see Hern, 2010; Hern, 2011; Hern, 2012; Hern, 2016; Hern & Snell, 2013 with additional sources at http://accelerationproject.org).

People often use the term evangelical to describe me. I felt like I had to go on the road with the message that we needed to fundamentally rethink developmental education. As teachers, our goal is to help students be more successful, but it was clear that we'd never achieve this goal with the current structure.

I knew from my classroom experience that students were capable and that they didn't need to spend a whole semester going from the sentence to the paragraph. I knew that, with the right support, students could meet high-level objectives. That gave me the confidence to talk with other faculty, to say: I know that what I'm telling you is scary and really different, but your students can do it.

N. A. S.: Who were the theorists and researchers who helped you to shape your philosophy of pedagogy? Are there specific writings that have influenced you?

K. H.: I started teaching English in 1991, while I was in graduate school at Bowling Green State University. The university had a strong training program for graduate student instructors that exposed me to people like Mike Rose, Peter Elbow, Erica Lindeman. I read Mina Shaughnessy's work (1977) on trying to understand the logic behind students' errors. Do students not know the rule? Is it an intermittent error that comes from not proofreading carefully? Is the student's writing clear when writing about personal experience but garbled when writing about complex ideas from the reading? Trying to understand and address the reasons behind students' difficulties remains a core part of my practice today.

I've also been very strongly influenced by the English department at Chabot, which had a well-developed instructional philosophy when I began teaching there. As I understand it from now-retired colleagues, people like Mike Rose (1989), George Hillocks (1986), William Robinson (Robinson &

Tucker, 1990), David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (1986), and K. Patricia Cross (Angelo & Cross, 1993) were influential in developing this philosophy in the mid-1990s. When I joined the department, the biggest change to my teaching practice involved the reading I assigned. For the 10 years before this, I had called myself a writing teacher. I required minimal reading and focused primarily on helping students shape their academic writing: improving their clarity and organization, mastering the writing process, integrating sources. But at Chabot, every class–whether developmental or college-level–had to assign at least one full-length book.

My classes became much more content focused. I taught a class with the theme of looking critically at everyday economic choices. We read *Fast Food Nation…* (Schlosser, 2001) and *The Wal-Mart Effect…* (Fishman, 2006), and we thought about that hamburger and what goes into that hamburger. We read about how the fast food industry influences the agricultural system and the workers at the meat

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processing plants. Students were reading a lot, and writing a lot about the reading, and their papers were so much better than in my previous classes. There was just no going back to my old ways.

I also became more focused on supporting students as readers. I had to make sure that I chose books that would be relevant and engaging for them, books that were accessible enough for them to enter the conversation but challenging enough to help them develop new skills as readers. For instance, the students needed to learn to navigate multi-voice texts. They needed to become aware that an author can summarize somebody else's perspective without agreeing with it, and that they shouldn't mistake the summary as being the author's point of view. That is a common student misread, and if I'm only assigning narratives, they won't have the chance to develop this skill.

Other research that has influenced me? There's an article I've used in my classes for a long time: Jean Anyon's (1980) *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work*, a sociological study of fifth grade classrooms from public schools in different socioeconomic communities. What does fifth grade look like in a working-class community, in a middle-class community, in an affluent professional community, or an executive-elite community? Anyon documented that students from different social classes were receiving vastly

different educations. The wealthy kids were encouraged to be creative and think for themselves, and the poorer kids were taught to follow procedures, obey the teacher, and collect right answers. That study has woven its way into my soul. I believe all kids deserve the opportunities of those affluent schools, and that's the kind of experience I want to provide to community college students. I usually ask students to read that article at the beginning of the semester, along with an excerpt from Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and we talk about these issues to provide a shared context for what we're doing together.

For the last decade or so I've also been thinking a lot about the noncognitive side of learning. One book that has influenced me is Rebecca Cox's (2009) *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another.* This really helped me understand my students' fear. Cox found that, in every community college she's studied, students fear that they aren't cut out for college, and many of them manage this fear by avoiding assessment (e.g., not turning in papers, not showing up for a test). In the past, I might have interpreted this behavior as meaning that the student didn't care. Now I understand that my role as a teacher is to lower the level of fear in the classroom so that students can engage and learn. Chapter 2 of Cox's book is another text I have students read at the beginning of the semester.

N. A. S: Can you tell the *JDE* readers a bit about the curriculum and instructional approaches that are central to the IRW (Integrated Reading and Writing) program at Chabot College? What do you think should be the appropriate instructional goals of an effective IRW program?

K. H.: Overall, we don't believe in decontextualized, stand-alone skills instruction at Chabot, either in reading or in writing. Students expand their vocabulary not by completing activities in a vocabulary textbook but by reading rich texts. And we address sentence-level concerns not with grammar workbooks but in the context of a student's writing.

I think the program learning outcomes at Chabot are pretty good, as far as instructional goals for an IRW program. Academic literacy is the umbrella concept, and we break this down into three core outcomes for students: (a) to independently read and understand complex academic texts, (b) to critically engage with the ideas and information in those texts, and (c) to write essays integrating the information from those texts. All of our composition courses–developmental or college-level–share these three learning outcomes, and students develop greater mastery as they move through the curriculum. These outcomes guide me in making decisions about how to use class time.

Everything I'm doing should be focused on the three big goals.

N. A. S.: Complete College America (CCA) has become a fierce advocate for corequisite models of developmental education, in which a student deemed to be at-risk in composition would enroll in a traditional, entry level, credit bearing composition course while receiving concurrent supplemental support. What are your thoughts about such a curricular design particularly in light of the successes we have seen with accelerated IRW programs? Are the two models at odds with each other?

K. H.: Corequisite models have produced phenomenal gains in student completion across the country, and there's evidence that they can help narrow racial/ethnic achievement gaps. They are frankly THE most powerful approach to helping underprepared students be successful, so I'm a fierce advocate for these models too.

For a lot of California community colleges, the first step in accelerating developmental education was to create an integrated reading and writing course one-level-below college composition. But now that faculty have gotten comfortable with the pedagogy, and see that students are capable of doing meaningful college-level work, corequisite models have felt like a logical next step. Several California colleges launched corequisite models in 2016 and many more will in 2017 and 2018. I would love to see Chabot move in this direction; the combination of our pedagogy with a corequisite structure would be very powerful.

Ultimately, integrated reading and writing is an approach to teaching, not necessarily a program. Whatever the structure–a regular college composition class, a corequisite model, an accelerated developmental course–all classes should provide students a rich base of texts to consider and support them to understand and engage those texts. That's what produces good academic writing.

N. A. S.: Developmental educators serve a diverse student population. Skills oriented programs have tended to utilize a one-size-fits-all curricular and instructional model. How do you see the IRW philosophy being able to serve this diverse population (first generation students, students of color, English language learners, adult students) so as to value, draw upon, and support their funds of knowledge?

K. H.: Chabot is an incredibly diverse institution: 80% students of color, a large immigrant and Gen. 1.5 population, high poverty rates, lots of first-generation college students. My experience there makes me confident that IRW philosophy works for all students. Even students with disabilities–a group that is often singled out

as nonacceleratable–have better outcomes in our accelerated course (Edgecombe, Jaggars, Xu, & Barragan, 2014). The study of the first 16 colleges offering accelerated models with CAP also found that all demographic groups benefited from being accelerated, which in English meant an integrated reading and writing approach (Hayward & Willett, 2014).

One feature of the IRW that I have not talked about so far involves organizing courses around a central theme that enables students to explore one topic deeply. This breaks from the typical composition-reader approach–a unit on America, a unit on sports, a unit on fairy tales–in which students read shallowly on several subjects and then produce papers full of broad generalizations. Instead, students pursue a deep investigation of a relevant and interesting question. This semester my class is examining the topic of bias. Our anchor text is the book *Blindspot: The Hidden Biases of Good People* (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). In the past, my theme focused on psychological experiments of the

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20th century, with discussions of the research ethics of different experiments, the causes of addiction, the reliability of human memory, and the existence of free will. The thematic content is the basis for all of the reading, reasoning, and writing we do all semester.

I think that approach works very well for a heterogeneous student population because it's engaging and motivating. If the students are interested in the topic, the skill development can be contextualized along the way. As an example, when we are debating the nature of addiction, students will have something they want to say, and they are more invested in expressing their ideas than if I was asking them to write a simple paragraph on a topic they don't care about. They want guidance on how to organize their ideas or make their writing clearer. This is a critical piece of our pedagogy in the California Acceleration Project: providing just-in-time remediation as students engage in meaningful, higher-level tasks, instead of frontloading discrete skills instruction. It's not that the skills don't matter, it's that we don't teach them in isolation.

N. A. S.: We both believe that informed and highly qualified postsecondary educators should participate in ongoing opportunities for professional development. What types of professional development should be undertaken regularly by faculty so that they might design and deliver

instruction that leads students to develop more sophisticated processes of reading and writing that promote their success within the college academic environment?

K. H.: Hmm. I'm not sure I have a prescription for all faculty, but I can share some things that have worked in the California Acceleration Project. Faculty often comment on the workshops where we examine students' papers together. I bring in papers from my own accelerated class, written by students who some may believe are "not appropriate" for acceleration: learning disabled students, English language learners, generation 1.5 students, students with very low scores on the placement test, and so forth. We look at papers from early in the term, when the work includes plenty of issues that need to be addressed.

But during the workshop, we don't begin with the problems. We begin by asking faculty to name what is good in the paper, what they see that is promising. We force an extended conversation of the positive, and we interrupt as soon as the word "but" comes out of anyone's mouth. The activity is about training our eyes to see what is there–not just what's lacking–to see what is emerging that can be drawn forth and built on. The whole paper might be three pages of a single paragraph, but the student really understood and explained an important idea in the reading, or came up with an original critical response that went beyond what we'd discussed in class.

The next part of the routine is to ask faculty to come up with 2 or 3 pieces of guidance they would give the student about how to improve, in either their next essay or a revision of the current one. The feedback is forward-looking and growth-oriented, not just about cataloguing deficiencies or justifying a grade. Teachers often tell us that when they see those early papers, they feel scared that they won't be able to get students where they need to be. But once they have been teaching in accelerated courses for a while they trust that tremendous growth is possible, and they can relax a little bit.

Another activity that has worked well involves asking faculty to develop an idea for a thematic course with colleagues from their campus. We seed the field by giving them outlines from past participants, courses on Food Justice, Hip Hop, Love and Sex, and Success. One group of faculty built a course around the book *Assholes: A Theory* (James, 2012) and divided it into subunits like "am I an Asshole?" and "what causes assholes?" During the activity, participants work in groups with their colleagues to come up with a theme and start to flesh it out with full-length books, videos, TED Talks, articles, etcetera. Each group's course design is then displayed on a poster, and we do a gallery walk in which everyone circulates with post-it notes, adding ideas to other groups' posters such

as "Here is a great video about your theme" or "You should check out this book."

When faculty develop a shared thematic curriculum, it creates an opportunity for ongoing professional development throughout the semester. They can look at student papers together, share class activities, brainstorm about things that aren't working. The shared curriculum allows them to ground every conversation in specific texts and student work, rather than abstract positions (e.g., how/whether to teach grammar). It's also a great resource for ongoing training and scaling up IRW pedagogy, with pretested materials that can be shared with new faculty.

N. A. S.: Let's take the professional development strand one step further. The literacy field has been greatly influenced by Samuel S. Wineburg's (1991) seminal article; it provides the theoretical foundation for Disciplinary Literacy as it focuses on the literacy practices found in specific disciplines and fields. What do you see as the needs and approaches for professional development of all postsecondary faculty members related to Disciplinary Literacy? What approaches can assist faculty to explicitly focus on and model the unique disciplinary literacies in their respective areas of expertise to promote both learning and critical evaluation of course content by all students.

K.H.: I'll put in a plug for Reading Apprenticeship (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012). I think it is a powerful professional development effort. At Chabot we have had faculty from every division– not just English, but career-technical faculty, biology, physics, math, history–participate in their trainings .

A while back, I participated in a faculty inquiry group with teachers from different disciplines who had all been trained in Reading Apprenticeship. We got together once a month, and we had an illuminating routine for our meetings. Each session, different instructors would bring a sample text from their classes, say a chapter from the physics textbook, a poem, or a set of math problems. We were directed to read the text quietly and make notes, then we'd go around the room and share our response: the questions we posed, the way we approached the reading. Finally, the disciplinary expert would share how she or he approached the text.

One day a history teacher brought in a primary source document. It was a sermon from a minister in colonial America, and the topic was how men should treat their wives. My master's degree is American culture studies so I feel like I can read American history. It's a closer discipline for me than say, physics. I made lots of notes in my response. The minister's language was incredibly gendered, reflective of the sexism of the day.

Yada yada. Then the historian shared what she saw: "When I look at this text, I notice that this is a sermon he is delivering to his congregation, and I ask why does he feel he needs to talk about this topic? What does it tell us about colonial America that he has to give this sermon that men need to be kind to their wives?" I was so triggered by all the gendered language from the time period that I had totally missed what she saw as a historian, that spousal abuse was a problem in colonial America, and that the minister was actually trying to mitigate it.

The activity illuminated for me how historians read.

"So, you want the students to make an inference?" I said, "You want them to read this primary source and make an inference about the historical period?"

My colleague was so used to reading this way that she wasn't even conscious she was doing it. "Oh!" she said, "I guess I do."

"Do you tell the students you want them to make an inference?"

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"No," she said. "I don't."

I saw this colleague on campus recently, nearly a decade after this exchange, and we both recalled the power of that moment. I became aware that, although I can guide students in general academic literacy as an English teacher, there are limits to my ability to truly prepare them to read across the disciplines. And she became aware that she needed to make explicit and transparent the kind of cognitive moves she takes for granted as an expert reader in her discipline.

For me this underscores why all faculty need professional development to support students as readers. We all need to apprentice students to engage the texts of our disciplines. It's not enough for me to teach generic textbook reading strategies in my English classes. I don't know how to help students navigate their diesel mechanics textbook. I have no idea. You know who does? The diesel mechanics teacher.

N. A. S.: If you had a crystal ball so as to look into the future, what would you see as the future of developmental education and for students requiring developmental education programming and learning assistance?

K. H.: I don't know if I can look into the future, but I can say what I hope the future will bring. I hope that we as a field continue to be concerned about supporting all students' success in college. That's the core mission of developmental education. I also hope that we will recognize that some structures we had built to help students–layers of developmental courses–are not in line with that mission. Over the years, as we created these layers, we didn't know they would have the unintended consequence of making students less likely to complete college. We didn't know about the high attrition rates that have become endemic to that structure. But we know it now, and it's our responsibility to do something about it.

Part of the solution will be to recognize that we have been placing too many students into remediation who don't need it. We need to let go of using standardized placement tests alone and allow more students to begin directly in college-level courses, using multiple measures for placement such as high school GPA and local campus assessments. Las Positas College in Livermore, CA provides a great illustration. In the past, the college had used Accuplacer to assign 65% of students to developmental English. Then in Fall 2016 the English department decided to allow students with a 2.5 high school GPA to enroll directly in college composition. They didn't even require transcripts; students just reported their GPA when they took the assessment test. Under the new policy, only 22% of students were placed into developmental English. Concerns regarding high failure rates or low performance did not materialize at Las Positas. In the first semester after the policy change, 77% of the students who would have previously been classified "developmental" passed college English, and 58% of that group earned As and Bs.

So, in the future, if we pay attention to the research, there will be fewer "developmental" students. And that's a good thing. But what about students who really do need additional support to be successful in college? As a field, I hope we can stop defending the practices of the past and channel our energies into building new structures–like corequisite models with excellent pedagogy–so that the support we provide makes students more likely to reach their college goals, not less.

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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

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/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.

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