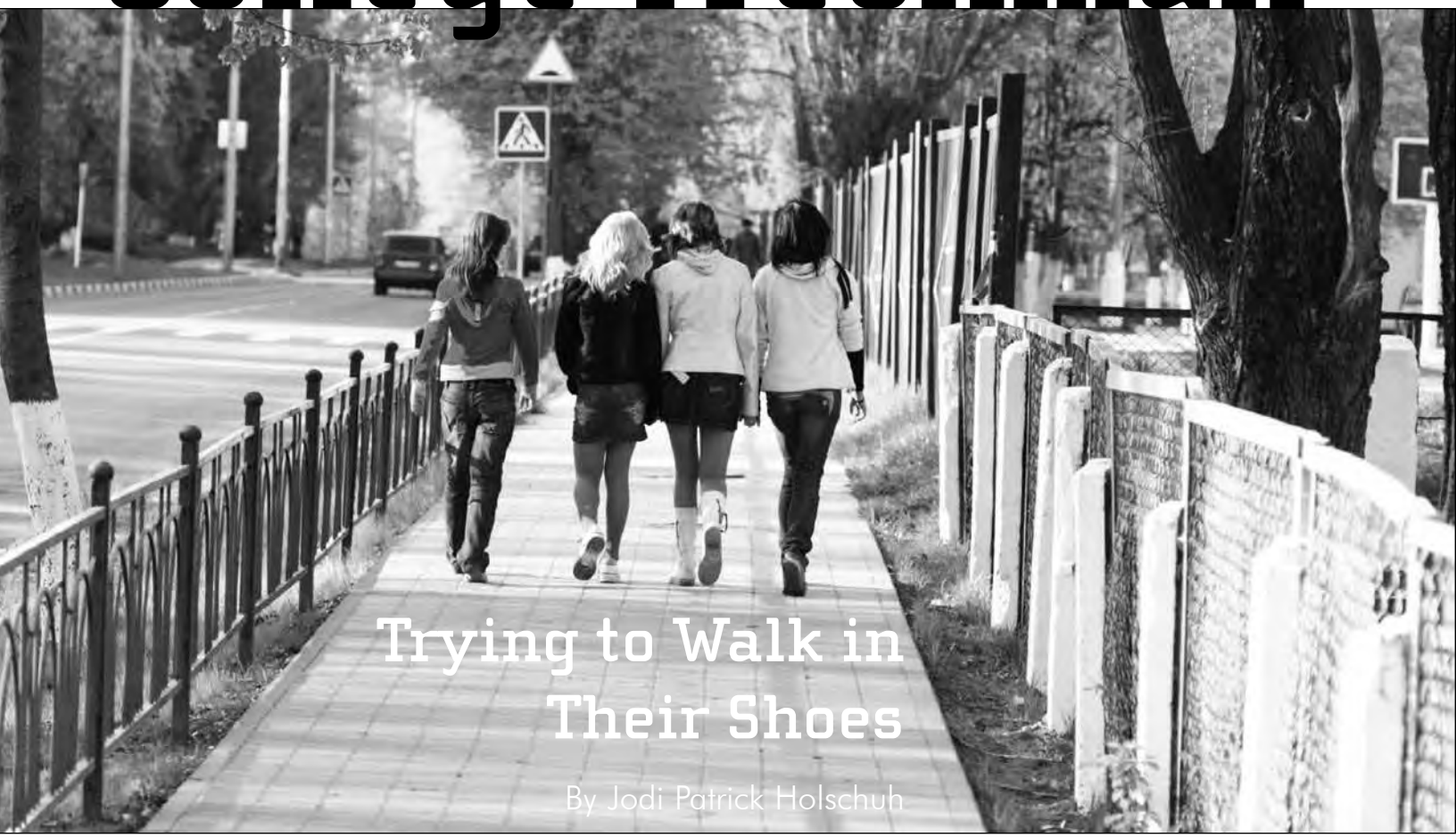
Read and Write Like a College Freshman



Trying to Walk in Their Shoes

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Abstract

This paper discusses my experiences taking a semester's worth of undergraduate courses in order to determine the literacy task demands placed on students in the classroom. It has been well documented that students struggle with literacy tasks when they enter college. My experiences indicated that part of this struggle might be because reading demands differ greatly among undergraduate courses both in terms of the depth of processing required and the varied type and location of course materials. Additionally, today's students are expected to complete a good deal of graded homework, which may not align with their expectations about the role of homework in college. Written and oral communication expectations also differ along disciplinary lines. In order to understand the diversity of literacy tasks, students need to be quite savvy about both professor expectations and sophisticated literacy strategies.

Keywords: college reading, college writing, literacy task demands

"Really? Undergrad courses? You *are* brave." The general response from my teacher-educator colleagues upon hearing about my plan to take a full course load of undergraduate courses surprised me. It didn't really feel that way, and it struck me as funny that professors—full professors in some cases—would think it was courageous of another professor to take a freshman-level course. I was not taking courses to be brave, nor was I taking them to try to replicate the undergrad experience.

My purpose was to understand the tasks of learning in college. Specifically, I was interested in the following questions: What literacy tasks are students asked to do? And where do students get the information they need to complete the tasks? My goals were simple: to stay on task the entire semester and to complete every assignment (both required and optional) asked of students. So when the syllabus said to read Chapter 2 before class, I had it done right on time and was prepared to discuss the information as a participating member of the group.

The college that students attend today is likely quite different than the one that many teachers attended. Although teachers have experience with college expectations, many may wonder, "What do my students face academically when they begin college?" My study was undertaken as a direct result of my experiences working with students who encountered difficulty in college, meeting them while teaching learning-to-learn and developmental reading courses. As I evaluated student work and examined their course materials from their content classes, I got the sense that literacy tasks asked of them were changing. I knew that professors were increasing their use of technology, but this was a vague notion—they were using LMS (learning management systems such as Blackboard), posting notes on the Web, and giving exams via computer. I wondered how or if the new learning systems impacted the literacy task demands our undergraduates faced. I also wondered how this might impact a student's approach to learning in undergraduate courses.

Several studies suggest that one challenge students face in college is the increase in text difficulty. Text comprehension depends on the *reader,* the *text* they will be reading, and the *tasks or activities* they must complete (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Students need to have an understanding of what they are being asked to do, as well as a repertoire of literacy strategies to help them handle a variety of tasks (Simpson & Nist, 2000). However, even students who were proficient readers in high school may experience difficulty as they transition to postsecondary levels. This may be because their reading strategies are no longer sufficient for the types of texts they encounter in college (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009). Or it may be because they have a misunderstanding or underestimation of the reading and writing tasks required at the college level (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Additionally, the texts student encounter in college may move beyond our ideas of a traditional single textbook (Pugh, Pawan, & Antommarchi, 2000; Simpson, Stahl, Francis, 2004; Wade & Moje, 2000). Thus, students may struggle when asked to think across texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012; Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004) and synthesize readings from disparate sources.

Students find that the literacy demands in college are quite different than those they experienced in high school courses (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009; Yancey, 2009). Though the tasks may appear similar—writing papers, reading textbooks, discussing ideas with peers— Yancey (2009) notes the tricky, varied, and complex nature of postsecondary literacy demands. Even identifying literacy tasks is complicated by the multiple ways postsecondary literacy instruction occurs and the ways literacy is defined in different contexts. Yancey (2009) describes these differences as a "parallel universe" with diverse reading and writing expectations. These expectations often differ depending on the academic disciplinary ways of thinking (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). For example, a student reading history would be expected to use multiple sources to provide the context and corroboration needed to evaluate information. In contrast, a student reading science would generally be able to read the textbook account. The focus in science is not on sourcing; it is centered on understanding scientific processes. Thus, there is a continuum of college readiness when it comes to literacy tasks because both the reading and writing demands are more challenging (Williamson, 2008). This paper reports on my firsthand experiences of the ways that students encountered the variety of literacy demands in undergraduate courses.

The Setting

I began my re-entry into the undergraduate experience by registering for four classes at a large research university in the South where I was also teaching a graduate-level course. This course load resulted in 16 credit hours, similar to a full course load for undergrads. In addition, I taught one graduate-level independent study course, completed revisions of a textbook, and submitted an NSF grant. It may sound exhausting, but it is not so different from the action-packed schedules of many undergrads, many of whom work full- or part-time, are involved in campus organizations, and maintain family and social commitments.

The Courses

The first decision to be made was to select which undergraduate courses to take. Creating a course schedule was a deliberate process as I sought to capture as wide a snapshot of the undergraduate experience as possible in one semester. I started by examining the general (core) education requirements for undergraduates. I wanted to take one course from each of the requirement areas, but, of course, it was not easy to do. Between breakout sessions in history and political science courses, lab sections in most sciences, and four-day-per-week language courses, it was virtually impossible to come up with a workable schedule. However, because I audited the courses so as not to take a seat from any of our registered students, scheduling was a bit easier for me than it was for students who also had

to cope with filled course sections. Throughout the process of creating a course schedule, I gained a renewed sense of empathy for the frustration students feel as they register for courses each semester because it is difficult to create a workable schedule given the restraints and constraints of the University system.

In addition to basic scheduling logistics, I made some purposeful course choices that limited my options further. I eliminated any courses that I had taken as an undergraduate or graduate student to avoid having an advantage on task understanding through background knowledge. French was out as was English, biology, psychology, statistics, and many, many others. Although I was able to minimize the effects of prior background in terms of content, I fully recognize that I do have the advantage of experience in overall task analysis, learning, and literacy and learning theory. However, I hoped to be able to use these skills to discover additional ways to help undergraduate students in college today. I also chose to avoid taking classes with friends, acquaintances, or anyone I knew personally (although many of them graciously invited me to sit in on their classes). I did ask them for advice on which classes to enroll and which professors to take. I also looked at professor reviews on ratemyprofessor.com to see what students were saying about the instructors. Finally, I wanted to take a range of large- and small-sized classes.

Thus, I decided on courses in these areas: Spanish, political science, geography, and economics. I attended every class, read the textbooks, took notes, and wrote papers. I completed homework and other course assignments, and took all exams, quizzes, and finals for one entire semester.

Each of the courses had several distinguishing features:

Spanish: Elementary Spanish was taught by a fourth-year doctoral student. She had learned everyone's name by the end of the first day and set the tone for this discussion-based course by having us use some limited Spanish right from the start. There were 30 students in the class, which met four times per week. Course tasks included daily homework, daily pop quizzes over vocabulary, three lab exams (which were mainly speaking and writing in Spanish), and a departmental midterm and final exam.

Political science: Introduction to American Government was taught by an assistant professor in his second year on the tenure track. The lights were off as soon as the class started each day so that he could show PowerPoint slides for his lecture to the nearly 300 people enrolled in the class. The lecture class met two times per week and there was a once-a-week breakout section led by a first-year graduate student. The course used a traditional textbook, a copy of the U.S. constitution, and other primary source readings. The four course exams consisted of both multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Additionally, students wrote four reaction/opinion papers for the breakout session.

Geography: Introduction to Physical Geography was taught by a non-tenure track lecturer who had taught at the University for many years. Although there were about 75 students enrolled in the class, more than half were absent most days. The instructor started class each day with The Weather Channel, which tied loosely with some of the course content but tended to stifle pre-class informal discussion. But at 2:30 on the dot, he started his daily lecture. Rather than PowerPoint slides, he used overhead transparencies that were somewhat yellowed with age. In fact, he used two overhead projectors as he lectured; one showed his notes and the other a diagram, figure, or picture. He posted class notes, test reviews, map guides, and other supports on his own course website (rather than the University's LMS). This class used a traditional textbook, but the primary source of information was the lecture notes. Course tasks included five multiple-choice exams, five map quizzes, and three pop quizzes.

Economics: Principles of Microeconomics was taught by a non-tenure track lecturer in her second year at the University. There were over 300 people enrolled in the course. Despite the large-lecture format, she made several attempts to engage students in class discussion both by fielding questions and by asking students to solve problems during class using a handheld clicker to submit responses. The course used both a traditional textbook (with an online textbook option) and an online learning tool that provided additional content, practice problems, and scheduled quizzes. Course tasks included weekly homework, three quizzes, and three multiple-choice course exams.

These classes provided a glimpse into the literacy course demands from a wide subset of the types of courses students take in their first or second year of college, and gave me a close-up view of what it means to walk in the shoes of a current undergraduate student.

Reading Demands

Each instructor listed a traditional textbook on the syllabus, but the usage in the courses ranged from being an essential learning tool to a supporting resource. Some instructors did not require the textbooks at all; others required a text, but did not use it in any significant way. Only in the Spanish class was the textbook indispensable for learning the course content. The Spanish textbook contained many exercises and explanations of grammar and vocabulary usage and was written in a reader-friendly style. Students were expected to use the book both for homework exercises and in-class work. Thus, we carried the book with us to class every day.

Political science class required a textbook; however, most of the concepts contained in the text were "covered" in lecture. I found the text to be very dry and, frankly, uninteresting to read, even though the topics addressed in text had the potential to be quite fascinating. The lecture rarely went beyond concepts covered in the text, so some students I talked to in class believed that they could get away with skipping the reading. This perception was

reinforced by the professor's practice; in spite of his inclusion of at least one or two questions from the text not covered by lecture, students could easily pass course exams without doing the reading. For the most part, exams consisted of questions about the lecture's content. The supplemental readings in this course were less negotiable. Typically drawn from primary source documents, students were required to reflect on the readings in short papers, which made the reading of such sources essential for success in the course.

Geography class required a textbook, but the professor pointed out exactly which sections would be covered on the exams, which meant that most students likely read only those sections and skipped the rest. In fact, he often pointed to a single paragraph or figure on a page or told students where to look for particular information. Although students expressed appreciation for this type of help, I am not convinced it was truly beneficial for students. The trouble with this piecemeal approach to the text is that students without a geography background had little context for the concepts presented. A student who focused on a sentence here and a paragraph there would come away with only superficial learning at best. I found that the text was comprehensive and filled with helpful diagrams, figures, and pictorial examples of the concepts in each chapter. Reading the chapters in full made it easier to discern the differences in complex descriptions, like in the diversity of rock formations, that students might find counterintuitive and confusing if directed to partial chapters or diagrams.

In the economics course, the professor did not require students to buy the textbook, but I cannot imagine how they could understand the complex principles without it. Although the lecture covered all of the course topics and the homework provided practice, it was the textbook that fleshed out the concepts both with economic theory and real-world examples. An economist or other economic expert might not have needed the text, but a typical undergraduate would surely benefit from its use. I certainly found this particular text to be an essential tool for the course.

Reflecting on Reading Demands

In teaching my learning-to-learn and developmental reading courses, I talk to students about how each professor will use textbooks differently, but this was a wider range than even I had anticipated. Researchers often talk about the difficulty students have in reading course texts, but student confusion about the ways textbooks are used in each individual course may play a significant role in how successful they are in each course.

In addition to traditional textbooks, students were expected to read from a wide variety of disparate sources. For example, in economics, we were assigned readings in a traditional textbook, provided access to online notes on the University's LMS, assigned further readings on a website that also provided practice problems, and completed a paper-and-pencil workbook.

When he asked me how I was passing each quiz so easily, I pointed out on the syllabus where the professor listed the terms to "memorizar." This taught me that because instructors' course materials and expectations can differ so greatly, undergraduate students likely need to learn effective strategies for keeping track of them.

Spanish class used a textbook, online workbook, classroom lab and online lab materials, and the university LMS. The political science course, in addition to the textbook, included court cases, congressional documents, and other original sources, which were located either online or in handouts. Each course seemed to have multiple sources of text information that were located in different places. Though most courses used the university LMS, many used other websites for course text and tasks including publisher and personal webpages. Given that many students underestimate the tasks of reading in college, and that the majority of reading strategies focus only on learning from a single text (Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004), we might expect that students would have trouble thinking in cross textual ways.

Additionally, I noticed that many students found it difficult to keep track of the multitude of text sources and found themselves unprepared for some tasks. In fact, I found myself feeling anxious about something falling through the cracks several times during the semester because there was so much to remember. Not surprisingly, it was the tasks that happened infrequently that caused me the most worry. I had no trouble keeping up with the text, homework, and LMS, but when, say, the political science teaching assistant asked us to find an article to bring to a discussion class, I needed to make an extra effort to remember to do it.

In addition to keeping track of the types of reading materials, students also needed to understand the depth to which they must process the text. This was a readjustment for me. As a graduate student or faculty member, we read professional text much differently than we expect our undergraduates to read course text. We try to understand big ideas and examine the main impacts or constructs in an article. We synthesize, analyze, and criticize arguments. As an undergrad, I needed to focus more on small details in some classes. For example, in my geography textbook, I read a section about the ozone layer—it described the problem, how it was caused, what the solutions could be. For the exam, I knew all of that information and was ready to construct an argument about how we can make needed changes.

What I didn't know was the name of the thin clouds that might exacerbate the problems with the ozone layer. In other words, I was able to conceptualize the problem but was not memorizing in enough detail. In political science, the short answer items on the exams could be answered using information from a single PowerPoint slide. Memorizing the list of ideas on each slide was necessary to do well on the test, versus being able to compare ideas across slides.

The advice I give to my own students—to try to pull ideas together and to think about the text ideas as they build—would have helped in some of the courses, but in two of the four classes, sheer memorization would have worked better. However, although memorization may have eluded me as a reading skill, the majority of our students are adept at memorization of facts when they enter college (Sternberg, 2008). The trouble is, those "facts" change quickly (Gallagher, 2010) and mean different things in different contexts, so students are much better off reading for the big ideas in the long run.

Written and Oral Communication Demands

In addition to reading tasks, all of the courses had expectations for written and oral communication. None of the courses I took was designated as writing intensive; only two of the four classes included any kind of sustained writing component. Writing demands ranged from monthly reaction/opinion papers, to personal essays, to no writing tasks at all. The political science course had the most extensive writing requirements, which included short answer responses on each exam and four one-page reaction/opinion papers about topics from our readings outside of the textbook. In these papers, the tasks built over the course of the semester from responding to publisher-supplied questions at the end of a reading to evaluating ideas across multiple sources. For example, for the last of these response papers, students were asked to describe the Plessy v. Ferguson case, compare it to the Brown v. Board of Education case, and discuss both positive and negative outcomes. This was a higher-level task that required students to synthesize and analyze across texts. Thus, the writing tasks grew more complex as students built their understanding of disciplinary topics and disciplinary writing expectations of the course.

In Spanish class, there was also a good deal of writing required. The purpose of most of our writing tasks was to utilize both the vocabulary and grammar learned in class. There were formal writing tasks (lab quizzes) and daily writing practice both in class and for homework. The tasks were challenging, requiring us to remember information from previous chapters as we built our Spanish writing skills. It was often frustrating to be unable to fully express my thoughts because of my limited language skills, a feeling my ELL students must have in my own classes every day. I gained a new understanding of how daunting their experience of learning course content can be. I think that the supported structure for writing used in this language course where writing expectations built along with language knowledge could be a model for developmental reading and writing classes with a large ELL enrollment.

In classes where there was no formal writing requirement, there were communication tasks that made sense for the discipline. For example, although the economics class did not have formal papers, the online homework often used experiments where we were asked to manipulate data in order to understand economic principles. These tasks provided experience in working with the theories in real-world ways. For example, we could plot the effects on supply and demand of gasoline during different seasons each year. Or we could use data to predict the effects of taxes on consumer or producer surplus. Overall, this type of work was the most useful for my own understanding of the concepts delineated in our text.

In geography class, we took several map quizzes to show our geographic understanding of where particular countries were and the types of physical geographic features in that region. We also went on a "geography treasure hunt" through campus in order to find different types of rock and other geographic features. Doing so built our geographic literacy by asking us to put our knowledge to use in real-world settings. Although this was not designated as a group project, several of us worked together. It became a collaborative effort that yielded long-term benefits because after working on the project, we began to meet as a study group for the rest of the semester. In general, students had an opportunity in all of the classes to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that went beyond a multiple-choice question. I found this was heartening, especially in the large-lecture courses.

Most classes had discussion expectations as well. Once again, these expectations varied widely. Before I began this project, I suspected that the majority of variation in discussion expectations would be due to class size, with the smaller classes offering more opportunity for discussion. But I found that it was not so simple.

Spanish, a smaller course, was almost entirely based on class discussion, and we were expected to contribute in each class. There was very little professor-led lecture over the semester as the majority of the class was based around using our new Spanish words. Sometimes the discussion was creative (Describe your dream house to your group. Provide enough detail so that your group can draw what you describe.); other times it was more rote (Tell a partner what you ate for dinner last night. Remember to use the past tense.). Each day the discussion provided crucial practice for language learning.

In geography, a medium-sized class, there was very little discussion. The professor would pose questions to the class from time to time that could be answered in a word or two; then he would move on with his lecture. He did provide an opportunity for students to ask questions at any time during

However, for professors who have studied their subject matter for years, learning in their content is like an Olympic swimmer gliding through the water—they have done it so often that they are not really conscious of how they go about it. For students, learning is more like treading water—they need sustained conscious effort so that they do not drown.

class, and seemed to encourage such questions, but he did not engage students in discussion about course concepts.

Both large lecture classes had discussion expectations, but they handled discussion in very different ways. In the political science class, the discussion was largely relegated to the weekly breakout section. The professor would field questions in class, but he did not engage in any whole-class or small group discussion activities during the lecture. The breakout section was entirely discussion based. The teaching assistant would pose questions and we would spend the period discussing those questions. To get the class to participate, the teaching assistant first asked us to share our ideas with a partner before sharing with the entire class. This resulted in richer discussion in most cases. In contrast, the economics professor actively sought class participation during the lecture. She accomplished this by posing several economics problems for the class to solve throughout her lecture. We would discuss our responses with the people around us and submit our responses using a handheld device. If she noticed that students did not understand the concepts, she would give us a hint and ask us to rethink it with our neighbors before going over the correct response. This provided an excellent way for students to gauge their understandings and misconceptions about complex and often confusing concepts.

What I learned by exploring the demands of the typical undergraduate student is that writing and oral communication demands are as nuanced and varied as the reading demands. Students need to be quite savvy to discern the distinctions between the expectations for each course. Additionally, they need to be flexible in terms of determining the best strategic approach for learning in each of these situations. It is no wonder that so many students do not know where to begin.

Lessons Learned

Sometime around March, as burnout began to set in, I began to question the wisdom of spending an entire semester taking undergraduate classes. The pace of college is demanding and does not seem to let up for anyone trying to complete all of the tasks assigned. However, I am grateful for the experience because I learned so much about what our undergraduates face.

First, although students have historically used multiple text sources in college courses, the numerous ways of accessing those sources is new and is often course-specific. Even though the University used an LMS to house material for individual courses, most professors used additional websites as well. It was not uncommon to need to visit three separate places to find text for a single class period. Even the course syllabus was something that needed to be located more than once a semester, as professors would regularly post updates to the original syllabus throughout the semester. In my Spanish class, a student who sat next to me each day failed almost every pop quiz because he did not know that he needed to look each week for the updated syllabus that described which words we should learn carefully. He considered himself a good student and was concerned that he was not doing well on this task. When he asked me how I was passing each quiz so easily, I pointed out on the syllabus where the professor listed the terms to "*memorizar*." This taught me that because instructors' course materials and expectations can differ so greatly, undergraduate students likely need to learn effective strategies for keeping track of them.

Second, professors are holding students more accountable for learning course material by assigning more homework. In the past, most students demonstrated their knowledge only several times per semester via course exams or papers (Doyle, 1983). However, the majority of the courses required daily or weekly (graded) practice. Many students enter college holding the belief that college courses do not require homework, and for students at-risk, this can lead to academic trouble if they are not able to self-regulate to complete the work (Bembenutty & Zimmerman, 2003).

Third, in the rush to get through all of the "covered" material, there is little time for deep thought. In fact, with the exception of the data-driven problems in the economics class and the writing tasks in the Spanish and political science courses, most of my coursework focused only on the surface structure of learning. However, students need time, experience, and practice looking for deeper structure to ever move beyond surface-level thinking (Willingham, 2007). In economics class, the homework provided the scaffolding needed to ask students to think more deeply about the concepts being learned. I suspect that other courses would benefit from such approaches; however, I understand the tension many professors feel between getting through the course material while still allowing time for deep learning. This tension is especially experienced in courses that are part of a sequence (e.g., Spanish I to Spanish II) where students need to have a certain amount of knowledge in order to move to the next class.

Fourth, the fact that professors are experts in their fields makes them an unreliable source for offering advice on handling

literacy tasks. Some professor advice, such as "you don't need to buy the book" or "you don't need to take notes on this," might actually hinder student learning. I do not think that the professors were trying to sabotage the students' efforts; in fact, I believe that they were honestly trying to help. However, for professors who have studied their subject matter for years, learning in their content is like an Olympic swimmer gliding through the water—they have done it so often that they are not really conscious of how they go about it. For students, learning is more like treading water—they need sustained conscious effort so that they do not drown.

Fifth, professors often held assumptions about student engagement, such as the idea that most students are "slackers." Some of these expectations were not unfounded. For example, right before the professor handed out the third exam in the economics class, a student sitting near me asked his friends when the exam was scheduled. Having missed class regularly, he had thought it was the next week and thus had not prepared. However, this ill-informed student was an exception. I was happy to find that most students went to class every day, completed all of the assignments, participated in class discussion, and were generally engaged.

My experiences in these courses provided insight into the tasks that today's undergraduates face in their first and second years of college. These insights can help high school and college teachers aid students in the transition to college learning. In fact, I made several pedagogical changes to my own teaching based on my experiences. I have cut down on the amount of work I assign and added writing tasks to aim for more depth in thinking and less knowledge "checking." I also am careful to explain the multiple literacy tasks my courses require, such as where to find materials, when students need to dig deeply into the reading, and how to approach the readings overall. I am trying to take a step back to remember that for students, learning in my courses requires the use of multiple literacy strategies. I ask students to analyze the literacy tasks in my class and in their other classes as well so that they can see the full gamut of course requirements. We also revisit this notion several times over the semester as students become better able to analyze course tasks.

Because the majority of students who drop out of college do so between their freshman and sophomore year (ACT, 2010), additional research is needed in this area to explicate some of the struggles and issues students experience as a result of the literacy tasks they encounter. Many students will need additional support and scaffolding to be able to make sense of the multiple tasks and expectations required for success in college coursework. In addition, further research aimed at understanding how the literacy tasks have changed in the 21st century can inform the strategic learning and learning strategy research and practice. I leave this experience believing that if more of us attempted the tasks we require of our students, we might better calibrate our practice to ensure their success, thus benefitting from a walk in their shoes.

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