Is a Writing-about-Writing Approach Appropriate for Community College Developmental Writers in a Corequisite Class?

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Current trends in developmental writing have focused on corequisite support courses that developmental writers take in conjunction with college-level courses. Much recent scholarship has focused on the design of the corequisite course, but a corequisite model also raises the stakes of the curricular design of the college-level course, since it now features developmental writers. In this article, we describe a qualitative research project designed to explore whether a writing-about-writing college-level curriculum is appropriate for community-college developmental writers in an ALP corequisite model.

The rich scholarship on developmental writing pedagogy in higher education means that departments seeking to improve lackluster pass rates or poor student performance have many possible options. However, for community college writing programs, determining the best interventions can be difficult, as these are, arguably, among the most marginalized writers in higher education. Current trends in developmental writing have focused on corequisite "support" courses that developmental writers take in conjunction with college-level courses. A growing body of research suggests that corequisite courses can do a better job at helping students quickly improve their writing skills and pass college-level writing requirements than a sequence of stand-alone developmental writing courses (Belfield et al.; Daugherty et al.; Logue). These corequisite courses can take many forms, including the one we use at our school, which is modeled on the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pioneered by Peter Adams and others at the Community College of Baltimore County (Adams et al.).

At North Central Michigan College, ALP sections of English 111—the first course in our college-level writing sequence—can have up to twelve college-level students and ten developmental writers. The curriculum presented in the English 111 course is the same across all sections; for the ALP sections, the developmental writers also take a non-credit-bearing corequisite (English 095) that occurs immediately after the college-level section. That corequisite course, taught by the same instructor, is designed to support the developmental

students' success in the college-level course. North Central uses a multiple-measures placement rubric that applies a combination of high-school GPA and SAT/ACT test scores to place students. The students placed in the corequisite must have below a 3.0 high-school GPA and low enough test scores to indicate that the corequisite class is the best fit.

An unanticipated consequence of our implementation of the ALP model was that it complicated discussions of the English 111 curriculum with some writing-program faculty voicing concerns that if the curriculum became too difficult, developmental writers would not be successful even with the extra support of the ALP sections. These concerns became especially salient in recent years, after our program adopted Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs's *Writing about Writing* as its default textbook (At North Central, all new instructors use the default textbook; experienced instructors have some discretion in choosing a textbook, although the writing program has recommended elements and course outcomes that should be included in every section of writing).

Ever since Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle's 2007 article, "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions," suggested a WAW curriculum for first year composition, there has been both interest and concern regarding the approach. For example, Libby Miles et al. critiqued the WAW approach as reductive, putting too much emphasis on one course to provide an introduction to writing studies, a field that is "a more multifaceted area of study," as well as voicing concerns that a WAW curriculum grooms first year students to become "academic scholars" (508). In response to such critiques, Downs and Wardle refined their rationale for WAW in 2013 as simply an acknowledgement that "we are a field and we know things and should teach them. Just like every other field. That's it."

However, several scholars have also noted the difficulty of the readings in WAW curriculum (Bird; McCracken and Ortiz), which includes writing scholarship originally published in *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *College English*, and other professional journals. Though she argues for the success of WAW, Jonikka Charlton notes that few faculty "could believe that first-year students would be engaged by such work" (3). In 2013, Wardle and Downs challenged the idea that WAW readings would be boring to students by noting that "while there are some difficulties with teaching this way, we have never found boredom to be one of them." Yet among our own departmental colleagues, some have voiced concerns that the reading is too challenging and too removed from students' own concerns, especially those of developmental writers.

While many North Central faculty have found the WAW curriculum to be accessible to developmental writers in our own co-curricular classes, we thought these concerns deserved to be addressed in more than an anecdotal

way. In this article, we describe a qualitative research study in which we interviewed ten students from four co-curricular sections in the fall of 2019. As we describe in our methodology, we asked them about how they learned to navigate the challenging readings, how they developed as writers, and how they understood writing as a result of the course. We also asked them about the role of the co-curricular course in their writing development. In the sections that follow, we present four major themes that arose from these interviews, and we discuss implications for writing programs that may decide to adopt a WAW curriculum for co-curricular classes. As these sections demonstrate, our study suggests that a WAW curriculum can be both accessible to developmental writers and lead to a greatly improved understanding of writers and writing.

Literature Review

Like Moriah McCracken and Valerie Ortiz, we avoid a deficit model for viewing developmental writers. However, we admit that WAW approaches are rarely suggested as appropriate for developmental students. Nonetheless, in a meta-review of best practices for community college developmental programs, Sim Barhoum identifies a research consensus that "developmental writing students need to be academically treated like transfer-level students" (799). The WAW curriculum has been tested in standard first year composition (FYC) programs, but few have researched its use in developmental classrooms. Barbara Bird found that, after using a WAW curriculum, her basic writers "demonstrated improvement, short-term transfer, and expanded intellectual contributions...as compared with freshman writers" (87). Charlton finds that the strength of a WAW curriculum for developmental writers is "its rigorous, academic nature" (6). McCracken and Ortiz examined students from a historically Hispanic institution and found that they responded well to a WAW approach. However, all of these studies were at four-year universities or colleges. We were interested in how this might work in an accelerated developmental sequence at a two-year college.

As we noted in our introduction, our developmental approach mainstreams developmental students into FYC to reduce opportunities for students to drop out. As the National Council of Teachers of English notes, "one of the primary benefits of acceleration via mainstreaming is increased persistence" (236). Charlton argues that developmental students see success with WAW because of immersion in the content, an enriched knowledge base, networks of support, and engagement (7-8). These are all elements that a corequisite course provides. Developmental students are exposed to an enriched knowledge base through their traditional FYC colleagues in class as well as their own immersive networks in the corequisite developmental section. Because the developmental section is smaller, there is greater engagement because the instructor is able to

spend more time with each student on the content and develop rich activities to aid comprehension.

The readings in *Writing about Writing* are difficult, and we know developmental students can benefit from support in developing strategies for reaching complex texts. Our college participated in Reading Apprenticeship training through WestEd, which follows Lev Vygotsky's work on social mediation in learning; apprenticing readers learn from skilled readers through metacognitive conversations. In their guide to reading apprenticeship, Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Lynn Murphy note that socially mediated learning "applies not only to activities with observable components…[i]t applies equally, and significantly, to activities that are largely cognitive, taking place inside the mind and hidden from view" (22). While we do not use a strict reading apprenticeship model, we focus on helping readers understand challenging texts through modeling and metacognitive discussions in the corequisite developmental course.

In addition to understanding the readings, we try to help students build confidence that they can perform difficult work in a writing class. Self-efficacy theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura and applied to writing by Patricia McCarthy, Scott Meier, and Regina Rinderer, is a useful lens through which to consider the struggles of developmental writers. Self-efficacy deals with a person's expectation of success and how it affects actual success (191). As McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer recognize, self-efficacy affects "what behavior people will attempt in the first place and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles" (466). Developmental writers almost by definition tend to have had a difficult history with reading and writing, and many have a low level of confidence in their reading and writing abilities. Charles MacArthur, Zoi Philippakos, and Steve Graham, in their article on community-college developmental writers, note that "self-efficacy for writing has been shown consistently to correlate with academic performance, including writing achievement" (32). This research highlights the importance of helping students learn to read and write about complex material, thereby helping them develop a sense of self-efficacy and preparing them for college success.

In our college, we focus on the transfer of writing and reading skills from one context to another, using David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's distinction between high- and low-road transfer. Specifically, our aim is to cue students for high-road transfer, which "requires mindful abstraction of principles to apply them in new situations" (Elon 2). To facilitate this abstraction, the corequisite section includes many opportunities for reflection on reading comprehension and writing skill development. According to Ellen Carillo, "[n]o matter how one teaches for transfer, the one consistent recommendation for doing so involves incorporating metacognitive exercises into writing courses" (36). As

Reiff notes, a major finding of work by Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak is that "when students are given the language and vocabulary to talk about and conceptualize writing, they are better able to abstract and apply this knowledge in other contexts" (Reiff 207). This comes not only from reflection but also from the WAW curriculum, which provides a threshold-concept framework for how writing works. According to Jessie Moore, "[t]hreshold concepts are not simply key ideas, but rather the core of the disciplinary world view. Therefore until students grasp threshold concepts, these concepts could be barriers to transfer." Based on the scholarship of Jan Meyer and Ray Land, threshold concepts provide the heart of a discipline and should be transformative, irreversible, integrated, bounded, and troublesome (Cousin 4). Learning to read difficult texts and apply the larger theoretical constructs of the field to writing tasks is at the heart of our approach.

Methodology

North Central Michigan College is located in a rural area, which is mixed socioeconomically, with relatively wealthy pockets surrounded by more middle- and working-class families (Fast Facts & Resources). The college enrolls around 2,500 students a semester, and in the fall of 2019, it offered twelve sections of ALP. For that semester, Dom, Carrie, and Mark had four ALP sections between them from which the participants in this study were drawn.

North Central does not have an IRB, nor does the college partner with a university that does. However, the college has an Institutional Researcher, part of whose job is to work with faculty and staff to develop ethical and methodologically sound research projects, and we worked with him to settle on a sampling method and interview protocol. The Institutional Researcher generated a random sample of twelve students, ten of whom agreed to participate in interviews. For their participation, each received a $10 Amazon gift card.

We did not collect demographic information on our sample group, mainly because we felt the group was too small to be able to form generalized conclusions. Our participant group was simply a random sample, consistent with "typical sampling," which John Creswell notes is useful for understanding how a "typical" participant—in this case, a typical student in ALP—experiences the situation that is under study (208).

Participants were interviewed by faculty who were not their classroom teachers, and Jami, Dom, Carrie, and Mark each interviewed two to three students, all of whom were presented with an informed consent form at the beginning of the interview (Appendix A). We employed what Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer term informal interviews:

Interviews you plan, but [which] are still flexible, especially in regard to the questions you ask and how you structure and direct the interview. Usually you write out questions in advance for these interviews, but you do so knowing that you will work through the questions loosely or that you may even end up departing from them. (132)

Our interview questions appear in Appendix B.

We submitted the interview recordings to Rev.com, an online transcription service. After the interviews were transcribed, Jami, who had none of the participants as students, assigned pseudonyms to all of the participants, and then she and Dom "cleaned" the transcripts—fixing obvious errors where the transcription service had, for example, misspelled the title or author of a reading a participant had referenced. Next, Mark and Carrie independently read through all of the transcripts and wrote research memos, following Kathy Charmaz's recommendations of capturing initial analysis, looking for possible patterns, and taking the first steps toward developing codes for the transcripts (80-85).

When Carrie and Mark shared their research memos, they noticed that they had observed strikingly similar patterns in the interviews. For example, Mark began his memo:

I'm noticing themes of personal growth and confidence. A big theme through 095 students is timidity before the class. Fear about writing. Several have relaxed about grammar as a result of instruction … They have built confidence. Several students said they improved on structuring their essays. They tend to have a better understanding of how writing works—how other writers write and learn, and how they do. They feel that the class will be valuable to them in the future.

Carrie began hers:

The running theme of the interviews is gaining confidence. Many students recollect that high school English felt like a prison of rules, and 095/111 helped them to realize that writing is everywhere, they belong within their own writing, rules should not be barriers to getting writing down on the paper, and they feel an ownership/invitation to dive deep that they did not feel before the class.

After discussing their research memos and observations, Mark and Carrie independently went through initial in vivo coding (Charmaz 55) and then worked together to develop a set of eight focused codes (Charmaz 57-60).

Dom and Jami then went back through the transcripts, evaluated whether they agreed with Carrie's and Mark's codes, and highlighted quotations that

they felt fit the focused codes. We then met as a group and further refined our codes, settling on four final themes:

- Improving Reading Comprehension
- Appreciating the Corequisite Class
- Developing Self-Efficacy
- Anticipating Writing Transfer

In the next section, each of these themes will be discussed in detail.

Findings

Improving Reading Comprehension

While our developmental writers did not dispute that the readings in a WAW curriculum can be difficult, they challenged the notion that they are too difficult. Consistently, students identified strategies they utilized in order to navigate these challenging texts. Many times, these strategies were part of the direct instruction of the course or gleaned through modeling of the instructor. For instance, Hannah mentioned:

> I took it paragraph by paragraph and wrote it down and then created ... well it's just like a big paragraph summary, just kind of like six words a piece for each paragraph … is what [my instructor] had us do. And that kind of helped, too. Because it wasn't about over-thinking; it was just like, "Oh, this is the point of that paragraph, move on." We did it with the Brandt piece together, and then I just kind of branched off, and on the bigger ones I would do that on my own, too.

Hannah felt that this strategy allowed her more efficient recall, since she had created an archive of her interpretations of the main paragraphs/sections of the texts that she could easily reference when she needed to. With a slight nudge from her instructor—and an introduction to a reading strategy that she had not been aware of in the past—Hannah found her way through texts that she acknowledged were difficult.

Similarly, Joseph highlighted the role of his instructor in giving him the tools necessary to be successful, one of which was the suggestion to skim the text for primary purpose and meaning. Joseph said his instructor encouraged students to "maybe [skim] in the lightest sense possible, just [go] through it and [get] the general ideas out of it and just [ensure] that we understood it in that sort of way." Emily, too, built an understanding through an initial skim of the text: "I would always skim the beginning and then find...the main points of whatever that reading was about, read that, and then skim whatever

backup they had for that information and just make sure that I highlighted on the main points of it." Both Joseph and Emily were then able to bring this global understanding of the texts with them to class where they could further unpack and explore the concepts.

Skimming wasn't the only technique students cited that helped them with initial understanding, though. Suzannah found great success with annotation: "It's talking to the text where you would underline it and then like write any questions you have…. And then you'd go back and reread it and it makes it more clear." Kurt took a suggestion from his father, a former high school English teacher: "So sometimes I'd have to get out a notebook and take notes on it and then even go back and reread it. My dad … said, 'Just pull out a notebook and start writing notes. Sometimes it'll help, sometimes it won't.'" Brian relied heavily on what he termed foreshadowing: "If I didn't understand it, I'd use … foreshadowing, and I'd really just pay attention to the outside and get a whole picture of it." Lacy used an in-class assignment to gain deeper understanding: "Having to journal everything, the summary and then the actual, the why's and stuff, that really helped bring more perspective and more views to the piece." While the approaches were different from student to student, the consensus our participants presented was that they had clear strategies that helped them do the reading.

Equally important to the specific strategies students developed to understand the texts was the grit and resilience they displayed in doing so. Nate, for example, worked as an overnight security guard, which gave him the time to tackle a reading, even if it meant consistent repetition: "I've got like eight hours from midnight to eight o'clock in the morning just sitting there. So you got nothing better to do but read. There's really no better way. There's no real strategy behind it. I'll read it until I understand it or at least feel that I do." Nate wasn't alone in citing perseverance as a key strategy for completing the readings. Lillia said, "I think just reading it slowly, and there was a few where there was a really long section, so I just had to go back and reread it to try to understand what it was really trying to say." Megan was no different: "So I just kept going. I read each section to make sure that I understood it and then I would go to the next one, read it, understand it. If I didn't understand it, then I would go through, read it again, and it would take me awhile, but I eventually got there."

In sum, our participants all articulated clear intentions to understand these difficult texts, and they all had developed effective reading strategies, most of which were modeled and/or explicitly taught by the classroom instructors.

Appreciating the Corequisite Class

Our developmental writers relied on the co-curricular class to continue exploring and exchanging ideas. The value of discussion and peer-to-peer or student-to-instructor interaction during this class was a common theme among the students during our interviews. According to Lacy, her instructor "pulled out what he thought was important [from the readings] also and let us reread that little section or whatever, and actually asked us our opinions on what we were reading from that … So we got all sorts of different views, and it was very well structured. I don't know, I took a little bit from everybody." Emily echoed this: "And then the in depth conversations we had, it wasn't just [the professor] talking, it was other people putting [in] their ideas and then [the professor] directing it to the way for everyone to understand it, I think that was, like, really beneficial for me."

While these discussions occurred in the college-level composition course, the students emphasized the importance of having extra time in the corequisite course to go into greater depth, both as a smaller group and one-on-one with the professor. Lillia: "I think the discussions in 111 played into 095, where my teacher just really made sure that we understood the material and we went back to understand it a bit more, and just briefly discussing it in 111." Several students indicated that the additional time to discuss readings in the co-curricular class was paramount to their success. Many of the strategies that students identified for understanding the texts (as mentioned in the previous section) had their genesis in the co-curricular class, and students appreciated that opportunity and felt more comfortable with the curriculum as a result.

Furthermore, students appreciated the stronger relationships made possible through the smaller class size in the co-curricular class. Without the potential intimidation of working inside of a classroom with twenty-plus students, some developmental writers were able to take a more active role in their learning and forge productive relationships with their instructor and peers. Joseph noted that during ENG 095, "a lot of our discussions also just turned into one-on-one, just talking to each other and having open communication. Because I think my professor was really good with that. Just that one-on-one, answering questions, and just helping us out as students, and giving us all the tools that we needed to progress further in the class." As for peer-to-peer connections, they allowed for the discussions mentioned above to expand more seamlessly, even outside the walls of the classroom at times. Consider Megan's experience: "My friend, Lauren, that sits next to me, my new friend that I made, she's a good writer. She loves to read, she loves to write. So she really helped me understand what was really going on and the main parts of the article … I have her number, so I would text her and be like, 'What the heck was this about? I don't know.'"

Ultimately, experiences like these allowed developmental writers—who were responsible for twice as much time in the writing classroom every week than their college-level counterparts—to value their time in ENG 095. Kurt indicated that his time in ALP transformed his entire frame of reference regarding writing. He stated, "I felt like I was able to push the past aside and just look at the future, which was a big help. It kind of cleared up the negative stuff from the past and I was able to make the present positive."

Developing Self-Efficacy

A significant recurring theme throughout the interviews is that students reported a developing sense of self-efficacy. Not only did students develop specific strategies for reading and understanding difficult material, but this practice also led them to feel a burgeoning confidence in their abilities. Students reported surprise at the extent to which their confidence grew, and this confidence allowed them to write more efficiently, with clearer writing plans, and better outcomes. They reported a sense of ownership over their writing as a result of ideas from the WAW curriculum that seems foundational to their ability to grow their perspectives and ultimately produce more developed and nuanced work reflecting a greater degree of critical thinking.

As Brian observed, "I think I've grown way more than what I thought I was going to. I mean, not just my spelling, but I was terrible at punctuation, and just about everything. [For] everything, it really helped." It's clear that Brian held assumptions about what he might learn from a developmental writing class; he originally placed his standards for growth on mechanical issues but was surprised to find he grew in multitudinous ways over the course of the semester.

Hannah echoed this sense of growth in confidence: "I think the whole confidence thing [prepared me to write in the future as a result of the course]. Because before I would… dread and if there's a(n)… assignment or something that I had to write up, I'd sit there and overthink. And I think with having the confidence and not being afraid to say what I want to say anymore, that opened up a whole new world for future writing for me."

"For everything" and "whole new world" suggest not just a useful experience within the WAW curriculum, but a holistic and transformative one that manages to move students out of places where their writing had been previously stuck. As Lacy explained, "I have become more confident in what I'm saying. I've always [written] just from my own perspective, but coming from the background I come from, I don't put too much weight in my views. And throughout this course I've been able to be more confident, in not only stating my views, but going into depth on it." Lacy's previous sense that her background was the mediator of access to expression prevented her from feeling confident enough to write, but exposure to WAW ideas helped her to see that she was

not only allowed to write, but that she should do so with confidence. Readings common in our courses, such as Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" and Malcolm X's "Learning to Read," illustrate that background impacts but does not necessarily constrain writing; these texts suggest that students find ways to take agency over their own education. This message seems particularly valuable to developmental students who are likely to have emerged from difficult or access-limited backgrounds.

Kurt noted that "moving forward, I'd definitely say that in the past I felt like I was walking on eggshells … I feel more prepared that I can actually sit down and work on a piece without going over the edge or working around boundaries." Like Lacy, he felt a growing sense that he should feel confident in what he has to say and should not try to constrain himself according to his perception of a professor's judgment. In fact, Kurt said his plan for approaching future classes is "don't be shy. Go in and tackle the class."

Suzannah agreed that the course helped her shift from being tentative to confident: "I feel like I've always been creative with my writing, but … I've always been … scared to kind of put it into my papers. But now, with the help and skills I feel more confident." Many students asserted that gaining this sense of agency over their writing made the experience of writing more pleasurable. As Lillia said, "[The co-curricular classes have] helped me come out of my shell a little bit … now, I find myself when I write comfortable, and … I like to write now. I used to not like to write." Megan exulted, "I got here and now I'm writing three to four page papers ... and it's not a punishment anymore. I like it." And Brian noted that "my standard of English is a lot higher, and [that is] why I'm doing a lot better." Greater confidence seems linked to greater interest in writing, which in turn engenders success.

Many students described the ways their writing strategies were more successful as a result of feeling confident. Lacy said, "My critical thinking has changed … [I] actually express my views in more of a knowledgeable way, not just 'hey, this is what I think,' but this is why I think it." She has learned over the course of the class to deepen her thought process and explore ideas in a more developed way. Similarly, Brian noted, "Now when I come to it, my writing is better, but I [also] think more like, okay, this is where I went wrong, this is what I could fix. I still have more to learn." His understanding reflects a crucial threshold concept: knowing that writing is a perpetual growth process is a key to continuously improving writing quality. Along these lines, Emily noted, "Before I just didn't care and I would give plain basic answers and now I go in depth and explain things." Overwhelmingly, our participants seemed committed to thinking more critically as they wrote, and their experiences in the class gave them the confidence to access deeper layers of understanding and an interest in finding ways to do so.

Anticipating Writing Transfer

In addition to gaining self-efficacy, students also reported that they could easily see how ideas from the WAW curriculum could help them with future writing tasks. Students saw utility in the class for future academic situations and their future careers; it's clear they generally understood the concepts as transferable.

Brian said, "When I was in high school, I was like, 'Oh, we're not really going to do anything with English later on … But as I think about it more, I want to be a conservation officer or whatever, and we're going to be writing all the time. So I think retaining the ability to write and what I have learned is really going to help me in the future." Emily agreed that her writing class will be useful for her career: "I feel like when I do my résumé or when I talk to people, or have to write anything down for any job that I have, if I'm more descriptive and more into answering the question they're going to like me better." Emily elaborated that thinking about discourse communities helped her to see how writing might factor into her future career as a nurse: "In the medical field you have to communicate with verbal and written responses. Us learning about that helped me better understand how there's different relationships between everybody. I already knew that, but it highlighted a lot more than what I would have basically known." Lillia also saw ways she might apply ideas from the course to her future employment: "We learned about genres in writing and the rules, like why you have to apply those rules. Like emails and résumés and everything, and just applying those skills will help [you] move forward." Brian, Emily, and Lillia seem to have learned that writing is a rhetorical activity, and the audience forms a crucial part of the message. Thinking outside of themselves and the messages they need to convey as writers, they now see the advantage in factoring in audience and the rhetorical situation, so they must be ready to adapt their writing accordingly. They also seem to agree that more careful, thoughtful writing will yield better results.

Nate explained that his English class had immediate transfer applications, because he was also taking a psychology class that semester. He said, "In my [psychology] class, I was able to implement a lot of what I've learned in the English class into the research paper we had to do and it was definitely a lot better." Nate noted that he likes to add in personal narration, but he understood that different classes would require different approaches. He added his stylistic touch in his psychology paper to the extent that it was appropriate but did not try to make it sound like one of his English papers. He was able to make this distinction because the readings and discussions of discourse communities taught him to understand how audience and expectation change according to the situation.

Suzannah also noted that learning about discourse communities and their specific expectations helped her to understand the ways she could apply writing outside of the writing classroom. She said, "It's the discourse, like the tools, the people, and what you're trying to make with it and I think that's probably one of the biggest things I got out of that class." Suzannah saw that understanding writing as a social and rhetorical activity would help her to write even outside the writing classroom, because she could see the factors she will need to consider. Furthermore, she could recognize both the knowledge and its important future utility, suggesting that a WAW approach helps developmental students not only see ways to transfer their writing knowledge, but also that transfer is crucial to writing success.

Kurt also considered the future beyond the classroom: "It may seem a little intimidating at first with all the writings and readings, but it all plays a huge role into everything for the future." Lacy made a similar point, saying, "With those building blocks…you become more confident as a writer, and then we want to do more and more. So I think that's a big key to further success in writing…just being able to think more critically about things so I can develop my own point of view."

Because these students were asked to see writing as a transferable, social, and rhetorical activity, they were able to understand that they will be expected to mold their writing to varying situations both academically and professionally. They also seem to know the tools they will need for doing so; a study of discourse communities seems particularly effective in conveying this understanding. They take it even one step further and sense that as they transfer and adapt their writing knowledge, it will lead to growth and greater understanding.

Implications

At the conclusion of the semester, the random sample of students we interviewed were successful. All passed the corequisite class, their average ENG 111 GPA was 3.24, and 70% enrolled in ENG 112 (our subsequent FYC course) the following semester. The numbers alone suggest that the curriculum was successful, but the consistent positive responses the students displayed in their interviews suggests that despite being developmental writers, they are fully capable of reading and considering difficult texts, and furthermore, they are capable of developing what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak would term a robust and portable theory of writing. (In *Writing Across Contexts*, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak define a student's theory of writing as an understanding of writers and writing that serves as a "frame" around writing situations, helping the student ask productive questions about a writing task and apply effective writing strategies to complete the task (56-58). In addition to being informed by writing scholarship, robust theories of writing in-

tegrate the student's practical experience and writing preferences; while being specific to the student, they are also broad enough to apply to many different writing situations, and thus are portable.)

Our students were able to pinpoint reading strategies that they developed over the course of the semester that helped them access the dense academic texts. What is interesting is that although we all taught reading strategies, none of us taught the exact same strategies in our courses, which suggests that there is no specific way the material must be approached in order to unlock it. For example, Lacey, Emily, and Lillia described in-depth class discussions about the readings that helped them build confidence and dig into the texts, while Megan relied more on peer-to-peer mentoring. Joseph cited one-on-one discussions with his professor as central.

This suggests that developmental students can, indeed, read highly challenging texts if they are encouraged and supported; comprehension was not linked to a specific pedagogical methodology beyond our support and expectation that they could manage it.

The co-curricular class also emerged as extremely important. Students mentioned connecting with peers, class discussion, one-on-one interactions with their instructors, and valuing the extra time to work on writing in a supported way as factors in their ability to succeed in the class. It's possible that the connections the students developed amongst themselves as they shared six hours of class time a week in a small group aided in their ability and desire to dedicate themselves to the difficult work. Extra discussions and more time to process ideas were likely also key factors in comprehension and success. It seems a key element of our approach that was most helpful to students was spending ample time in the co-curricular class digging into the readings in more detail.

We also think that the WAW curriculum itself did what it was supposed to do: help students develop a much deeper understanding of writers and writing that was at once personal and portable to different writing contexts. Nearly all of the students brought up the notion of discourse communities as a foundational discovery; realizing that writing is bounded by situations and audiences helped them to see new ways they could access and shape their own work. For several students, such as Brian, Kurt, and Susannah, this idea helped to dispel the common developmental writer assumption that writing is either "right" or "wrong." Many also mentioned literacy sponsors as a key topic in the class; thinking about their own literacy histories through the lens of Deborah Brandt's research helped encourage them to take agency over their literacy futures. They also brought up texts on process; the metacognition involved in examining how writing works seemed to help them understand writing more deeply and find more confidence in their own processes. Further

research might help sift out exactly which roles the curriculum itself and the co-curricular class might play in students' success.

What is particularly encouraging is that students seemed not just to understand the material but were prepared to apply it. This study suggests that the WAW curriculum, coupled with a co-curricular support class, encourages developmental students to practice increased metacognition, meta-analysis, and reflection and build confidence in themselves through these acts. In short, they can conceptualize writing as something more than a product, and they more effectively understand their role as autonomous agents in creating text. As a result, they can better understand what a writer is, what a writer does and—more important—what they need to do to be or become better writers. Furthermore, as they articulated their portable theories of writing, many students utilized language that seemed more natural or authentic, which suggests that these learners were able to understand and decode the complicated texts inherent in a WAW curriculum, as mentioned above, but then recodify the concepts in comfortable terms.

For several of these students, such as Kurt and Hannah, the curriculum also had an emancipatory effect. No longer were they restricted by the experiences they had in the past or the relatively negative attitudes they had regarding writing. The continued repetition of challenging tasks seemed to build into true self efficacy. As a result, many of these students actually liked writing more by the end of the semester and were confident that they could produce good writing. Not only does the WAW curriculum not scare them away, but it seems to encourage them to reconceptualize themselves as writers, with the confidence necessary to approach future tasks and enjoy the challenges inherent in crafting effective writing.

Conclusion

We understand why some writing faculty might be hesitant to use a WAW approach in a course with developmental writers, and indeed, we would be reluctant to recommend such an approach outside of a co-curricular model. However, we think this study strongly suggests that a WAW curriculum can be accessible and transformative for developmental writers, provided they have the support necessary to develop effective reading strategies. We also think our findings are notable because they focus on developmental writers at a community college—a group that tends to be more academically challenged than developmental writers at four-year schools (Bailey 1). While our findings confirm our program's decision to adopt a WAW curriculum, we think this article may reach beyond advocating for a particular curriculum. We hope it will provide encouragement to writing faculty to assign challenging, advanced reading and writing activities to developmental students, regardless

of curriculum. As our findings demonstrate, such readings—and the discussions they spur in corequisite courses—can be transformative.

Appendix A

Consent Form

I give the researchers consent to record and transcribe my answers to today's interview with the understanding that my answers will be kept anonymous and that my participation does not in any way affect my grade for English 111/095. I also understand I can end the interview at any time. I give permission for my answers, along with those of other students, to be used to improve the North Central Michigan College's writing program curriculum. I also give permission for my answers, along with those of other students, to be used for publishable scholarship, provided my anonymity is maintained.

_____

Name

_____

Date

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this research project! Our primary goal is to understand how our curriculum is working here at NCMC so we can continue to improve it. We may also write up and publish our results to help other writing programs at different schools. We want your honest answers! We will be recording this interview and having it transcribed so we can look for patterns, but your answers will be kept anonymous, and your participation does not affect your class grade in any way. In return for your participation, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card.

Do you have any questions about the process? If not, could you please sign this consent form allowing me to record our interview and use it for this research? Again, all your answers will be kept anonymous.

How would you describe your growth as a writer over the course of English 111/095?

- Do you see writing and writers any differently than you did at the start of the course?
- Have you made any major improvements in your own writing over the semester?
- Are there ways you have changed your writing process over the course of the semester? If so, why did you make those choices?
- Can you put your finger on any key readings or writing projects that influenced your understanding of writing or your own ability to write?
- If you look back to where you began this course, what surprises you most about the progress you've made or the learning you've done? How has that been impacted by the curriculum itself?

A major component of this course was the exploration of important ideas about writing; the textbook and some instructors use the phrase "threshold concepts" for these. In your own words, what are threshold concepts, or the overarching ideas about writing presented in 111?

- What are a couple threshold concepts you see as crucial to writing? Please feel free to use your own words or paraphrase ones from the book or the department—there's no wrong way to answer this!
- Has your understanding of threshold concepts changed how you think of writing, or how you approach your own writing?

A major goal of this course is to help you write better in the future, whether that's other classes or the work world. Do you feel better prepared to write in the future as a result of this course? If so, in what ways?

- Were there any specific activities, writing assignments, class discussions, or readings that you think worked especially well to help prepare you to write in the future?
- Was this class different in how it approached writing from English courses you've had in the past? If so, how?

We are curious how you used the book and what you thought of the readings. We don't expect you to have memorized the readings, and this isn't a test! We just want to know what you thought.

- Some of the readings were particularly challenging. Can you describe how you approached those readings? What strategies did you use to comprehend the material?
- Can you point to any readings that had a big impact on how you thought about writing, writers, or key writing concepts? Which ones? Why?

- Were there specific ways your professor or peers helped you understand and apply the readings?
- Do you think about any ideas from the book when you sit down to write an essay, either in this class or others?

How would you describe yourself as a writer now? How has that changed from the beginning of the semester? What role — if any — has the WAW curriculum played in this?

Thank you so much for your time! Your participation will help us improve our curriculum for future students, and maybe even other colleges' curriculum as well.

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