

Student Response to a Corequisite Pilot Program: A Retrospective

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ABSTRACT

This retrospective article presents the results of a pilot study on student perceptions of a corequisite model for developmental writing. Qualitative survey data was collected at the beginning, middle, and end of Fall 2013 at a large public university in central Texas. A total of 21 students participated in this study. Eleven students who were near the cut-off for the placement exam were enrolled in a first-semester composition course with other students who placed directly into first-semester composition. These 11 students also agreed to meet outside of the composition classroom at a set time for the corequisite course. Another ten students who were near the cut-off for the placement exam were placed in a traditional 16-week developmental writing course that served as a control. Responses were analyzed using coding practices outlined by Saldaña (2009), including initial coding, categorizing, and theming. Themes that emerged in the responses of students enrolled in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course included the following: (a) this course is pointless/a waste, (b) mismatch between placement and self-perception, and (c) transferability. Themes that emerged in the responses of students enrolled in the corequisite model included the following: (a) a lot is riding on success in the corequisite composition course, (b) unsure/nervous about expectations, and (c) improved self-efficacy at the end of the course. The major implication of this study is the importance of including student voices in the implementation of models for developmental education.

In the midst of legislation in which models of developmental education (DE) are continuously changing, stakeholders should reflect on (a) the effectiveness of mandated models of DE and (b) the importance of engaging student voices in implementing models of DE. In Florida in 2013, Senate Bill 1720 mandated that institutions of higher education offer accelerated options for DE, including corequisite models. The College Completion legislation in Connecticut mandated that by 2014 DE should be offered within an entry-level course or offered as a pre-semester college readiness program. In 2015, Minnesota passed the College Readiness and Completion Act mandating the use when appropriate of corequisite models in place of traditional developmental courses. In 2017, House Bill 2223 in Texas mandated that all institutions of higher education implement corequisite courses for DE.

For developmental writing, specifically, there is long-standing evidence that corequisite models can be effective (e.g. Grego & Thompson, 1996; Rigolino & Freel, 2007; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jaggars, & Edgecombe, 2010; Michas, Newberry, Uehling, & Wolford, 2016). The benefit of these models is that they (a) are credit-bearing, (b) reduce time-to-degree, (c) reduce stigma, and (d) provide contextualization.

Scholars and educators point out the inequity of a system in which some students are granted credit for a writing course while other students are denied credit and the opportunity to work toward their degree (Rigolino & Freel, 2007). When developmental writing courses offer no credit, students may feel that their writing has less or no value, and instructors may feel frustrated that students who have

great potential are not trying (Rodby & Fox, 2000). In fact, many scholars argue that traditional basic writing courses create basic writers (Bartholomae, 1993; Galindo, Castaneda, Gutierrez, Tejada, Jr., & Wallace, 2014; Grego & Thompson, 1996; Rodby & Fox, 2000).

Corequisite models may address this inequity, not only by offering credit but also by reducing time-to-degree, which provides financial viability to students and institutions. After years of gathering data for the Accelerated Learning Program, Adams (2016) has pointed out that while instructional costs to the college are increased in the short-term, the increased number of students who enroll in first-semester composition and are retained thereby increases the amount of tuition and funding from the state that the college receives.

Additionally, corequisite models can reduce or eliminate the stigma attached to being in a developmental writing course. Specifically, corequisite models can reduce the labeling of students as remedial, basic, or developmental (Mlynarczyk, 2016; Rigolino & Freel, 2007). In fact, Mlynarczyk (2016) has argued that one of the reasons corequisite models are successful is that they not only rename developmental writing, but also reframe developmental writing from an idea of remediation to an idea of acceleration. As such, students feel less like they are held back, and instead feel like they are challenged. As Rose (1989) has said, "Students will float to the mark you set" (p. 26).

Finally, corequisite models may provide student writers with a context for writing and participating in institutional discourse, which, in turn, offers students the opportunity to apply newly learned writing skills to the

composition classroom, to think deeply about the expectations of an academic audience, and to empower themselves through seeing their writing as integral to the academic conversation (Rodby & Fox, 2000).

Alternative positions do not necessarily deny the value of corequisite models but point out that further inquiry is needed. Collins and Lynch (2001) have acknowledged that corequisite courses can be effective but argue that, too often, stakeholders see this model as the only alternative to the traditional prerequisite course. Some scholars point out the flaws in placement and exit assessments and argue that assessment needs our attention (Agnew & McLaughlin, 2001; Shor, 2001). Soliday (1996) has expressed concern that mainstreaming into composition might take away “sheltered educational pockets for academically marginal writers” (p. 85).

Perhaps the most important addition to this discussion is that even when evidence-based models of practice are available, policymakers should still involve instructors and students in the decision-making process and should consider local contexts when mandating models of DE (Evans, 2016; Fitzgerald, 2001; Galindo, Castaneda, Gutierrez, Tejada, Jr., & Wallace, 2014; McNenny, 2001; TYCA, 2014; Wiley, 2001).

This retrospective article presents the results of a pilot study on student perceptions of a corequisite model for developmental writing. The pilot study was conducted in Fall 2013 following Rider 34, which mandated that all institutions in Texas offer a non-course competency-based option (NCBO) with flexibility for institutions to design their own NCBO. These earlier findings have implications in light of House Bill 2223 (2017), which mandates that all institutions in Texas implement the corequisite model.

Methods

This pilot study was guided by the work of Adler-Kassner and Harrington (2002), who conceptualize developmental writing as a political act. Adler-Kassner and Harrington (2002) argue “Basic writing classes can become sites for investigating the contexts and ideologies associated with a range of literacy practices, particularly students’ and those in the academy (and even the basic writing class itself)” (p. 31). This pilot study investigated the assumptions of the state and institution regarding student success and motivation in developmental writing and introduces students to the discussion about implementing models of developmental writing.

I collected qualitative survey data at the beginning, middle, and end of Fall 2013 at a large public university in central Texas. A total of 21 students participated in this study. Participants in the study initially enrolled in multiple sections of developmental writing based on their placement scores on the Accuplacer and Compass.

I worked with the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) office on campus to identify students on the bubble—students who scored between 88/4 and 80/5 on the Accuplacer or 85/4 and 59/5 on the COMPASS. Any student who enrolled in developmental writing and met the score requirement on the placement exam was invited via e-mail to participate. The incentive for enrolling in this program was simultaneously receiving credit for developmental writing (which was not a credit-bearing course toward graduation) and first-semester composition (which is a credit-bearing course toward graduation).

Eleven students volunteered to enroll in the intervention. These students were enrolled in a first-semester composition course with other students who placed directly into first-semester composition. These 11 students also agreed to meet outside of the composition course at a set time for the non-weekly corequisite seminar. Another ten students who also met the score requirement but who did not volunteer or who were unable to volunteer based on their schedule were placed in a traditional 16-week developmental writing course that served as a control. These students attended the traditional 16-week developmental writing course with students who placed into developmental writing but who were not near the cut-off point.

I taught both the first-semester composition course and the corequisite seminar. The seminar focused on making the knowledge construction process more transparent, helping students to navigate institutional processes, and giving students insider knowledge, not only about the course content but also about *why* they were learning that content. Adler-Kassner and Harrington (2002) cited conversations about this kind of insider knowledge as being crucial to the work of developmental/basic writing; specifically, they recommend having conversations

“about how they [students] thought about writing and reading, what they expected to learn in basic writing courses, how they thought about their own writing and reading, what they expected to encounter in college classes, and where the ideas that they had about these things came from” (p. 2). These conversations formed the foundation of the seminar meetings that served as the intervention for this study. Another instructor who shares this belief system—providing students who place into DE with insider knowledge—taught the traditional 16-week developmental writing course that served as a control.

As a result of this exploratory pilot study, I hoped to learn about student perceptions of both the traditional 16-week developmental writing course and the corequisite model in order to include student voices in the implementation of corequisite models of developmental writing.

Even those students who were initially unsure or nervous about the corequisite composition course had improved self-efficacy later in the semester.

As a primer, students responded to task value items (4, 10, 17, 23, 26, and 27) from the *Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)*. The *MSLQ* is a valid predictor of final grade in a course with a strong framework based in motivational theory (Pintrich et al., 1991). Additionally, reliability on the task value subscale which is used in this study is high ($\alpha = .90$) (Pintrich et al., 1991). The *MSLQ* measures student motivation and learning strategies related to a specific college course on a 7-point Likert scale (Pintrich et al., 1991). For example, one item on the scale states, "I think I will be able to use what I learn in this course in other courses" (Pintrich et al., 1991). The number of students participating in the pilot was not conducive to any meaningful analysis of this quantitative data. Instead, the *MSLQ* served as a way to start a conversation with students.

At the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, students in both the control group and the corequisite intervention responded to the following open-response question: "What are your feelings about this course right now?" Responses were analyzed using coding practices outlined by Saldaña (2009), including initial coding, categorizing, and theming.

Findings and Discussion

Themes that emerged in the responses of students enrolled in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course included the following: (a) this course is pointless/a waste, (b) mismatch between placement and self-perception, and (c) transferability. Themes that emerged in the responses of students enrolled in the corequisite model included the following: (a) a lot is riding on success in the corequisite composition course, (b) unsure/nervous about expectations, and (c) improved self-efficacy at the end of the course.

The predominant theme that emerged is the belief that the traditional 16-week developmental writing course is pointless or a waste. The words "waste" and "pointless" were used explicitly and frequently in student responses. For example, one student stated, "this course is pointless for me to take." Another student stated, "I think it is a waste of my time and money." Other students referred more directly to the non-credit-bearing status of the course. For instance, one student stated, "I don't want to do it, because it doesn't count," and another student stated, "I would rather struggle in a regular class than be in a developmental class that gives no points towards GPA." This belief did not change throughout the semester.

The feelings of resentment about being placed into the traditional 16-week developmental writing course are related to the self-perception of the students placed into this course, particularly at the beginning of the semester. In fact, one student plainly stated, "This course is pointless for me to take because I consider myself to be a good writer." As another example, a student stated, "I feel me taking this course is unnecessary because I consider myself a strong writer." Another student stated, "I feel like this is pointless and I don't need it." These students

have a positive self-perception about their writing ability that they feel doesn't match their placement into developmental writing.

The resentment that these students on the bubble have about being placed into the traditional 16-week developmental writing course may support the assumption among legislators that students on the bubble who are forced to take a traditional developmental writing course may not be motivated. Additionally, to explain the mismatch between self-perception and placement in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course, one student said, "I think I should be in English 1310 [composition] because I know I'm capable. I was just lazy on my entrance exam so that's why I'm here." Only one student brought up not taking the placement exam seriously. However, there has been a legislative move in many states to more clearly explain what is at stake when taking placement exams and to offer prep sessions.

Despite the negative feelings toward being placed in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course, many students had positive feelings throughout the semester about the transferability of the content. One student expressed, "I think I should be in English 1310 [composition], but this class will come in handy so it's not too bad." Students enrolled in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course discussed transferability to composition, to other classes that require writing, and to jobs. Students talked about the course as a good "prep" or said it would help "prepare" them for other coursework. One student stated, "It will help me in my actual English class." Another student stated, "I feel like it will honestly help me with every class I have in the future that includes writing papers." At the end of the semester, one student reflected, "I feel that this course has been helpful to me in developing my writing skills, so that in the future I will be more prepared for higher level writing." However, the theme of transferability might be artificial as this concept was included in the items on the *MSLQ* that students responded to as a primer to the open-response question.

By contrast, while a few students enrolled in the corequisite model brought up transferability, it was not a consistent theme. As such, the theme of transferability might relate to the positive self-perception of students enrolled in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course. If students believe they have mastered course content, they may be more likely to think about how to transfer that content. As discussed previously, the students enrolled in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course believed they did not need developmental writing and that they were capable of succeeding in composition. However, students who do not feel confident about their mastery of course content—such as the students enrolled in the corequisite model—may be less likely to think about the transferability of that content.

Students enrolled in the corequisite model expressed a feeling that a lot was riding on their success in composition. For instance, one student stated, "I have to do a good job in 1310 [composition] and not fail." Students

enrolled in the corequisite course talked about having the “chance” or “opportunity” to take first-semester composition. While students expressed being grateful for the opportunity “to be able to take both English credits in one semester,” students were also clearly “nervous” or “unsure.” For instance, one student stated, “I am nervous for it because I don’t know how to write well.” Another student stated, “I’m nervous because English has always been hard for me.” Yet another student stated, “I am nervous for it . . . I don’t think I was prepared in high school for writing college essays.” In these examples, students brought up feeling underprepared for college writing, mirroring our discussions about underprepared students in the field of DE.

Being underprepared likely left students unsure and nervous about the expectations in the corequisite composition course, especially at the beginning of the semester. Specifically, students brought up workload, feedback, and grades. As an example of a comment about workload, one student stated, “I am nervous for it . . . I know we will be assigned a lot of papers this year.” Another student stated, “It’s a lot of work put on me right now and I’m not very used to that.” Yet another student explicitly used the term “overwhelmed” to discuss writing papers. Later in the semester, one student explicitly referred to feedback stating, “I’m a little unsure with my writing ability, because I get mixed feedback with my essays.” Another student referred to grades stating, “It is hard to have confidence in myself because of harsh grading.” Students talked about the grading as being “hard” or “harsh” in comparison to what they were used to. In each of these areas—workload, feedback, and grading—these students were underprepared for the expectations of college-level writing.

Importantly, even those students who were initially unsure or nervous about the corequisite composition course had improved self-efficacy later in the semester. For example, one student stated, “It has been a very long semester, lots of extensive writing . . . very challenging essay prompts, but I managed.” Another student stated, “In the beginning it was really challenging, but it helped me to become a better writer.”

Conclusion

In thinking about the improved self-efficacy of students on the bubble who had the opportunity to participate in the corequisite program, I’m reminded of the famous Mike Rose (1989) quote I mentioned earlier: “Students will float to the mark you set” (p. 26). Five years later, I remember these students as being some of the most empowered students I’ve had the privilege of teaching. All of the students enrolled in this program

passed composition, many earned high grades, and, most importantly, these students became leaders in the composition classroom during workshop and other group activities. As a reminder, these students were enrolled in a class with students who placed directly into composition. Yet, it was students who initially placed into developmental writing who became leaders in the composition classroom. As a whole, this program was effective for this group of students. However, the findings of this study are not generalizable due to differing local contexts and student needs. The data do, however, present some interesting implications.

Probably the most notable finding is a mismatch between placement and self-perception of ability for students enrolled both in the traditional 16-week developmental writing course and in the corequisite program. Students enrolled in the traditional course resented being placed in developmental writing and believed they had the ability to succeed in composition while students enrolled in the corequisite program were worried about their preparation and their ability to succeed in composition. Both groups of students came from the same pool of possible participants who were on the bubble. The different feelings these two groups had about placement and their self-perception of ability and preparation have implications for how we place students, how we talk about placement, and even for how we talk about and define college writing and literacy in college, high school, and policy.

As mentioned above, these findings support the assumption among legislators that students on the bubble who are forced to take the traditional 16-week developmental writing course may not be motivated in the course. As such, legislative mandates have the potential to be a positive change in the educational experiences for students on the margin.

However, student voices should be a part of those policy changes. For example, students enrolled in the corequisite program expressed concern that they were not adequately prepared for college writing. As such, student voices could provide insight about curriculum changes with regard to the pipeline between high school English and college composition.

Students also need a voice during institutional implementation. The feedback we received from students changed the way we framed our discussion about the corequisite program. For instance, based on the finding that students were motivated by the “chance” or “opportunity” to register for the corequisite program, we sent out opportunity letters inviting students to participate in the program. Based on the finding that students in the corequisite program were unsure or nervous about the expectations in the composition course, the chair of the

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department came in to give a pep talk at the beginning of the subsequent semester. We also later housed this program under the Writing Center and moved the teaching responsibilities in the corequisite program to the Assistant Director of the Writing Center. Therefore, students who might have been worried about the expectations of the composition course attended the supplemental seminar in the Writing Center, so that when the seminar ended, they walked out into a room full of additional support.

It is also important to engage student voices in the conversation about how we define and frame developmental writing. That so many students have referred to the traditional 16-week developmental writing course as “pointless” or a “waste,” not only in this study but also at many other institutions, has implications for how the work of developmental writing is being framed both inside and outside of our field. Five student scholars from California State University, San Bernardino who were “categorized as remedial” discuss the importance of being involved in conversations about the work of developmental writing and how having these conversations pushed them to “speak out to the academic community about how institutional language constructs students and shapes their relationships with their families, with other students, with professors, and within the professions they plan to enter” (Galindo, Castaneda, Gutierrez, Tejada, Jr., & Wallace, 2014, p. 5). If we involve students in the conversation about what developmental writing is and should do, then students have buy-in, and we have become a field that is truly student-centered. As a result, the positive message about what we hope to accomplish as a field will emanate from these students.

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