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Jeremy Logsdon

Western Kentucky University, jeremy.logsdon@wku.edu

Daniel Super

Western Kentucky University, daniel.super@wku.edu

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Beyond Credit: The Philosophy and Practice Behind a College Freshman Literacy Intervention Course

Jeremy Logsdon

Western Kentucky University

Daniel Super

Western Kentucky University

Students frequently enter college underprepared and underpracticed for the rigor of college-level reading. This lack of a requisite and vital skill is a hurdle that college freshmen need to swiftly rectify. Hoeft (2012) noted that even when students read, they frequently fail to comprehend what they read. This study revealed that while 46% of the students indicated that they had read the required reading, only 55% of these students could exhibit even basic comprehension of the text.

Often, the attempted remedy for this demonstrable lack of readiness to comprehend complex text comes in the form of mandated enrollment in remedial or developmental courses that bear no credit. Regrettably, many researchers have also found that the need for remediation in a student's first year reduces the probability of graduation (Clotfelter et al., 2014; Martorell et al., 2014; Rose, 2012). Even more troubling is some research showing that students in need of remediation who take an adjunct-heavy courseload are less likely to persist to their second year than similar students with permanent faculty teaching them (Bettinger & Long, 2005). This realization has sparked national conversations regarding the place for these courses in American higher education, although the need for such a conversation to occur and to serve these students is apparent (Super, 2016).

Some studies show that providing even minimal teacher support for reading has a positive impact on student comprehension and performance (Ryan, 2006). The implication is simple yet quite serious. Students are likely not to read without direct instruction or motivation to do so, despite the overwhelming evidence that reading increases both general and domain-specific content knowledge (Doolittle et al., 2006; Richardson, 2004; Ryan 2006). Whether the issue of underpreparation in the effective navigation of college-level reading falls upon the student or the institution is not the issue at the moment. If colleges wish to retain these underprepared readers, then institutions must develop support for this population that helps to bridge the gap between students' current skillsets and the rigor of college reading expectations.

At a mid-sized regional southeastern American university with an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students, faculty created a literacy intervention course to meet the needs of students who enter underprepared in reading. The

course, designated hereafter in this brief as READ 101, is required for those students who are admitted to the university but are, in terms of college placement test scores, demonstrably underprepared in the area of reading. For the past several years, the course has served thousands of students in a face-to-face, traditional semester format. There is also evidence that the course positively impacts student GPA, retention, and persistence to graduation (Super, 2016).

University Infrastructure

As is the case in any organization, institutions of higher education, which address a problem at scale, require systemic support. In addition to responding to state-mandated edicts in 2009, the university initiated a concerted effort to address the number of students requiring remedial coursework in the areas of reading, English, and mathematics. The credit of administrators overseeing this endeavor is related to the area of reading; the university is dedicated to offering students a credit-bearing course taught by full-time faculty from the Department of Literacy in the School of Teacher Education. The commitment from the university to providing infrastructural support was paramount to the success of READ 101.

Commitment to Credit-Bearing

Despite their proliferation on university and community college campuses, remedial and developmental education courses are typically perceived as insufficient in scope to have any significant impact on student success or retention (Grimes, 1997). One could argue that the differences in the population of students involved in developmental or remedial coursework as opposed to those enrolled in credit-bearing courses could be the reason for this lack of effectiveness. However, even when controlling for student background, mere enrollment in remedial education has a negative impact on student retention (Bettinger & Long, 2004). Universities must find a way in the curricular process to offer introductory-level coursework that provides the necessary support to underprepared students without the need for zero-credit developmental courses, a notion supported by Crawford (1993). This approach would aid in the time to degree and encourage students to persist toward completion, as the more swiftly progress is made toward a credential, the more likely students are to complete college (Bowen et al., 2009; Martorell et al., 2014). Universities cannot ignore that failure on the part of many students to complete developmental sequences may be due in part to “significant structural obstacles” created by institutions (Edgecombe, 2011, p. 25). The paradox in this is that the very course crafted to help students graduate is, in some schools, preventing them from ever graduating (Bailey et al., 2010). The remedial course instead becomes a direct, expensive, and non-credit-bearing barrier to student success. Ultimately, the ethical obligation to provide students with the best educational

environment and support systems remains the duty of every college and university as soon as the decision is made to admit the student.

In recent years, the *modus operandi* has been to offer credit for courses that were previously classified as developmental or remedial and not for credit. Ultimately, this is not enough. The utilization of credit in these courses is merely the first step in providing a useful experience for at-risk college students. Many universities have already redesigned the structure of their remedial courses to provide college credit to positively influence student effort and engagement within the course (Sachar et al., 2019). Among the myriad reasons given for providing credit are degree completion timeframes and to avoid students finding ways to skip developmental courses (Van Orden, 2020). With this understanding of the importance of credit bearing courses now in place at many institutions, focus can be placed on the other elements that go beyond the importance of credit.

Commitment to Staffing Courses with a Qualified, Dedicated Faculty

The trend for most institutions has been to staff developmental education courses with part-time, adjunct faculty. This proves the most cost-effective solution for educating a populace for whom the university has little hope of continuing longer than only a few semesters. Adjunct faculty members report spending much less time than their full-time counterparts giving students feedback and meeting with students. They are rarely involved in college student success initiatives and rarely, if ever, have opportunities to receive professional development, frequently due to lack of opportunity and financial motivation to participate (Anthony et al., 2020; Butters & Gann, 2022; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). Even more unfortunately than this, students who are taught by adjunct instructors tend to have lower academic outcomes of success than would otherwise be expected (Ran & Xu, 2017).

Approximately 30% or fewer of developmental courses are taught by full-time faculty, a statistic that has not significantly changed over the last thirty years and is an issue in both the community college and university settings (Bettinger & Long, 2005, 2010; Boylan et al., 1994; Conway, 2023; Datray et al., 2014; Gerlaugh et al., 2007). Counterintuitively, the population of students who may well require the most support is not receiving support from the most qualified faculty—those who possess advanced degrees in literacy and years of experience teaching at the college level. The quality and effectiveness of the instruction offered to this population of students is a chief factor in their ultimate success (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Many universities do at least have some support available for faculty development (Wright et al, 2018). However, this support is not necessarily content-specific and may not address literacy at all. Ultimately, if universities expect to intervene on behalf of the underprepared students admitted and hope to

retain those students to graduation, they must commit to serving them with highly qualified, dedicated faculty members.

Professional development is prevalent at the university level, but it is not always afforded to adjunct faculty. This is especially troubling when 78.8% of adjunct instructors are motivated to engage in professional development (Anthony et al., 2020). It is worth noting, when discussing qualified, dedicated faculty, that many universities are doing active work in creating said qualified, dedicated faculty. University centers devoted to teaching and learning are found throughout higher education, although they are by no means ubiquitous. Wright (2023) stated that 38% of public universities have a Center for Teaching and Learning (or similar analog). However, when viewed with the understanding that these centers may not even necessarily identify their faculty, adjunct or full-time, as their target audience, it helps make more evident the case that even the presence of such a center may not improve instruction for an at-risk population of students.

For these reasons, this university chose to hire full-time faculty who were highly trained and credentialed literacy professionals. Rather than rely on professional development or Centers for Teaching and Learning to train adjunct instructors or existing faculty in other disciplines, this solution treats the domain of literacy with the same esteem and import as every other academic discipline on campus.

Description of Students

The population of students for whom the READ 101 course was designed included students who would otherwise be relegated to mandatory enrollment in a noncredit-bearing developmental course. The university bases decisions on “readiness” for gateway coursework on student ACT and/or SAT scores. Primarily, students in the university’s service region have taken the ACT, and it thus serves as the principal metric in determining course placement. The vast majority of students enrolling in READ 101 enter university with an ACT Reading score of 15-19, considerably below the national threshold of 21 and a state marker of 20 to be considered “college ready.” Demographically, these students are representative of the university in terms of gender distribution. However, disproportionately more students of color are enrolled in READ 101 than are enrolled in the university at large, an unfortunate commensuration with national norms (ACT, 2010). An average semester yields 200-250 students enrolled in READ 101, the preponderance of whom are freshmen.

Course Philosophy

A fundamental difference between this course and the developmental alternative is the philosophy of intervention rather than remediation. Cognitive-based models should replace stigma-charged and outdated deficiency models that

often do not improve underprepared students' skill and strategy development or do not improve dropout and graduation rates (Flippo & Caverly, 2009; Mt. San Antonio College, 2008). Remedial and developmental courses “dip down” to teach reading skills may have been missed in middle school reading instruction/standards. Even if students respond positively to the remedial course, they are often stunted at a level well below that which would make them prepared to read the complex and high volume of college reading textbooks/prints. According to the philosophy behind READ 101, students need to urgently reach an independent reading level of at least grade equivalency 13 by the end of the course.

This concept utilizes Vygotsky's theory of proximal development, which states that individuals should be expected and encouraged to grow beyond their current level and be provided with activities that stretch their boundaries (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory of proximal development intricately ties to the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). The theory of the Zone of Proximal Development states that individuals have nascent but growing academic functions or skills and that exposure to increasingly more difficult skills, scaffolded with support, will help these individuals mature their academic progress (Vygotsky, 1978). Psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) discussed the concept of a growth mindset as the belief that one can change and improve abilities, including academic strengths, with practice and effort. This growth mindset intervention approach results in a more beneficial experience for students than does the existing remediation model. Simply put, the driving philosophy of READ 101 differentiating it from the common products of developmental and remedial coursework is that students need assistance now.

The name of the reading class for those who need extra practice has long been a sore point for many in academia. In 1938, Harvard changed the name of its remedial reading course from “Remedial Reading” to “Reading Class” and immediately experienced an increase in enrollment (Wyatt, 1992). Although a difference exists between remedial education and developmental education, many universities started using the phrase developmental education for both (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002). Myriad researchers use these terms interchangeably (Attewell et al., 2006; Bailey, 2009; Boylan et al., 1999; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Stuart, 2009). Due to both the inherent stigma of the word remedial and the accepted practice of using the terms “remedial” and “developmental” interchangeably, this university and instructors associated with READ 101 consistently refer to the class as a developmental course.

Philosophy to Practice

In sharp contrast to the typical workbook-driven model of remedial reading, best practices in literacy intervention course design results in a different class structure for READ 101. Considerable course seat time is used for an open, round-

table discussion format of the authentic texts used in the course. This open format allows for a wide variety of teachable moments for students, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, debates, and instruction. By using authentic reading experiences with real literature, students can more easily find an application for improving their literacy skills (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). This also allows students to practice engaging in academic discourse, a skillset that all adult learners need as they progress through their postsecondary academic career (Mezirow, 1997). This skillset learned from academic discourse serves multiple purposes, all of which involve skills that will come into play over the course of the learner's higher education career. Additionally, as noted by Alexander (2005), students must engage in and experience systematic changes in how they process information. Students should complete the READ 101 with proficiency and expertise in reading appropriate texts, and this can only occur by addressing each student's deficiencies in text processing. In READ 101, this occurs in many activities that allow the student to engage in deep-processing strategies as they consume and manipulate texts.

The remaining sitting time is devoted to practicing reading and writing, as well as some assessments. At its most basic, there is a clear distinction between reading skills and reading strategies. Reading skills are associated with the "proficiency of a complex act", and reading strategies are a "conscious and systematic plan" (Afflerbach et al., 2008, p. 365). A skill-based reading curriculum also incorporates part-to-whole instruction, which holds that students who learn the smaller components of the reading process will ultimately become proficient readers. Researchers indicate that a strategy-based approach utilizing whole-to-part reading is a more effective method of developing proficient literacy skills (Goodman & Goodman, 2009). Whole-to-part reading is the usage of starting with challenging texts and scaffolding readers with support as they become progressively stronger with complex print (Goodman & Goodman, 1990; Westbrook, 2013). With these types of strategies and practices, students, regardless of age, can progress from effort to automaticity (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Scorza et al., 2015). Automaticity, the "automatic use of specific actions while reading occurs at many levels – decoding, fluency, comprehension, and critical reading," is a vital step in literacy fluency (Afflerbach et al., 2008, p. 368). Without automaticity, students will struggle with literacy. Purposeful, authentic reading strategies can enhance students' literacy skills, which they can then carry over into their other college courses, an authentic, real-world utilization of these literacy skills.

Another best practice incorporated by READ 101 is to provide reading assignments that are graded and returned with extensive teacher comments (Ryan, 2006). These comments can occur in a variety of manners, but ultimately, teacher feedback truly drives a successful literacy intervention. Students need to know both

what they are doing well and what they need to improve upon. This cannot be accomplished with a workbook activity or an absent teacher.

Returning to the previously mentioned statistic that only 46% of students are even reading assignments, it is fundamental and paramount that a successful reading intervention course find a way to address this. A method utilized by READ 101 instructors is frequent, substantive feedback. This feedback does more than just function as a best practice for a literacy intervention; it also encourages, and even requires, non-compliant readers to read the text (Hoeft, 2012). If students do not read, there are no best practices that will increase their literacy skills. However, by making READ 101 credit-bearing and required, these students are more likely to read, and with the best practices embedded throughout the course, comprehension follows (Agustina et al., 2021; Filgona et al., 2020).

The course instructors meet regularly throughout the year to ensure that all sections are taught using the same materials. While reading materials change from semester to semester, the same types of reading materials are utilized. Trade books appropriate for college freshmen, such as David McRaney's (2012) *You Are Not So Smart*, along with articles on a variety of topics, comprise much of the reading load of the course. The actual content of the reading for READ 101 is irrelevant though, as the instructors teach students how to extract evidence from the text to formulate appropriate arguments, a task that ensures student understanding. In real practice and efficiency, READ 101 students apply the skills learned in the READ 101 class to authentic materials they use in their other college courses. READ 101 instructors also assist students in applying strategies for evidence extraction and argument formulation to their other coursework while remaining careful to not assume any position of authority on texts or topics from other departments.

The READ 101 course has shown efficacy with both increased student GPA and student retention. With successful completion of READ 101, defined as earning an A, B, or C, students had significantly greater GPA and retention than students of similar classification who took a remedial, non-credit-bearing course (Super, 2016). These findings held true regardless of ethnicity, high school GPA, or low-income status.

Conclusion

In addition to benefiting from an increased GPA compared to their counterparts relegated to developmental coursework, the students in READ 101 also earned three hours of credit. This means that it is possible to enroll students in college-level coursework and guide them to success, regardless of their background.

READ 101 was created to help college students succeed by sharpening the skills necessary for learning in all other courses. This model is ultimately grounded in simplicity, and while simplicity does not necessarily mean it is easy for any

involved parties, it is duplicable and can result in a positive impact for universities that devote the necessary resources to serving this population.

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