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Promoting Communication Among Developmental Education Professionals

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Editorial Comments

This Fall 2007 issue marks the 4th anniversary of the NADE Digest. We want to extend our appreciation to all the authors who submitted work for publication; your ideas reflect the creativity, scholarship, and dedication so indicative of developmental education professionals. Thanks to our hard-working editorial staff of reviewers; your thoughtful comments and close readings resulted in an outstanding diversity of articles and a strong foundation on which to build.

Building on strong foundations is integral to our first article, "Motivating Basic Writers through Self-Assessment and Goal Setting." Susanna K. Horn encourages her students to view themselves as a community of writers through building on past successes, critically assessing their writing, setting appropriate writing goals, and following through on them with workable strategies.

Speaking of strategies, who among us hasn't used a sports analogy in the classroom to spark interest? Tony Lerma provides several come-from-behind stories to illustrate the positive effects of cooperative learning in his College Algebra classes. "Cooperative Study Groups: Give your Students the Home Team Advantage" reveals that self-esteem and success rates rose when his students worked in study groups.

Sherri Latimer and Shannon Johnson detail how reading, writing, analyzing and performing poetry improved their students' reading skills in "The Road Less Traveled: Poetry and Videotape in a Developmental Reading Class." Students selected one poem to read aloud, and then reviewed the videotapes, resulting in more focused reading, stronger analytical skills, and a new appreciation for vocabulary and syntax.

Once again, the significance of building a strong foundation is explored in "Student Voices: The Literacy Histories of Developmental reading Students in a South Texas College." Authors Arlene Ready and Paula Parson argue that developmental reading curriculum must include explicit strategies to help students acquire and maintain positive reading experiences if they are to become successful readers and lifelong learners.

Are you enamored with prepositions? Or are you afraid from them? Concerned on the direction English is going to? Susan J. Behrens and Cindy Mercer offer an interesting linguistic background and study of how their students, both native and non-native speakers of English, employ prepositions. "The Style of Which this is Written: Neutralizations of Prepositions in English" urges us not to ignore prepositions as "small words of little importance," rather to instruct our students in their significance while appreciating the flexibility of this dynamic, if diminutive, part of speech.

In our last article, "What Were They Thinking? Decision-Making in the Experiences of College Students at Risk," Stephen O. Wallace uses an ecological framework to examine how and why students make decisions. Wallace's article provides a firm foundation for understanding students' decision-making process.

Finally, as NADE's 2008 conference theme reminds us, developmental educators must continue to devise revolutionary methods with which to improve the success of our students. We hope these articles provide innovative ideas for all of you to implement in your own classrooms.

Mary Ann Bretzlauf, Laura Villarreal,
& Mollie Chambers
Co-Editors

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Motivating Basic Writers through Self-Assessment and Goal-Setting

SUSANNA K. HORN

THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON
WAYNE COLLEGE

It has long been established that self-assessment and goal-setting are regular features of the writing process of experienced writers. It has also been demonstrated that students develop more power and control over their writing when they are encouraged to become their own evaluators. Therefore, to help beginning writers think and act more like successful writers, teachers must integrate reflection and self-assessment as core components of English writing instruction. This article summarizes how one Basic Writing course actively engages students in consistent formal and informal self-assessment and goal-setting activities that encourage them to develop a “writerly” mindset as they modify their behaviors to better approximate those of experienced writers.

How can we better motivate beginning writers to confront the difficult yet joyful task of writing – to understand deeply what they are doing and to figure out how to do it better? Guided by composition theory (Elbow, 1982; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1972), for decades writing instructors have fittingly encouraged students to put ink/toner to paper, to talk about their ideas and intentions, and to witness the effect their writing has on an audience, all in an effort to help students realize that successful writers take responsibility for their own learning and become self-regulated writers (Zimmerman, 1990). The ground-breaking research of Emig (1971, 1983), Perl (1979, 1980), Flower and Hayes (1981), and Sommers (1980) showed that self-assessment and goal-setting are regular features of the writing process of experienced writers, and these researchers’ findings have spurred many teachers to help student writers develop those important

competencies. As established by Black and Wiliam's comprehensive review (1998) and demonstrated by Lee (1997), O'Neill (1998), Oppenheimer (2001), and others, a classroom atmosphere that makes self-assessment and goal-setting central to the teaching process can move students toward self-regulation and increased achievement. O'Neill (1998), in particular, stresses that students develop more power and control over their writing when they are encouraged to become their own evaluators; therefore, reflection and self-assessment must be core components of English writing instruction. This article summarizes how one Basic Writing course actively engages students in consistent formal and informal self-assessment and goal-setting activities that encourage them to develop a "writerly" mindset as they modify their behaviors to better approximate those of experienced writers.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND WRITERS

Rather than stifle student interest by grinding through a review of the syllabus, many college professors start the first class of the term with an ice-breaker of some kind – an activity to help students feel as if they are part of a community of learners, diverse individuals working together to improve their written communication skills. But why stop with community building? True to my first-day and oft-repeated promise that I will not waste students' time, the first activity of the term is designed to help students realize that they already know a great deal about setting a goal and about the importance of team work, of effort, of perseverance, and of imitating an appropriate model. Moreover, they are often surprised to discover that they even have some preliminary goals for their own development as writers.

We start with mini-interviews conducted in groups of three – small enough to be non-threatening, yet large enough to require some attention to time management. The following five interview items are designed to elicit non-invasive personal information appropriate for classroom interaction and to keep students focused on their roles as writers:

1. Demographic information (family, current job, favorite sport, pets, etc.).
2. College major and/or career goal. “Undecided” is an acceptable answer.
3. Area of expertise. Brag a little. Tell about something you are good at, something you have recently learned to do, or an area of interest.
4. List some “keys” to learning the above skill or to researching your area of interest. In other words, what do you DO when you learn?
5. Name one or more things you would like to learn more about, related to writing.

After the triads complete their mini-interviews, each student introduces another student to the class, and some listeners take turns summarizing on the board the responses to the five items. The result is a chart with five columns: Name, Major, Area of Expertise/Interest, Keys to Mastery, and Writing Goals. The creation of the chart affords many opportunities for the instructor and students to “connect,” to learn from, and to indicate respect for one another’s expertise. As they examine the Keys column, students typically begin to realize that the development of expertise takes effort – whether in the form of practicing/perseverance, creative problem solving, following a model, or help-seeking. The creation of the Writing Goals column requires students to assess their writing abilities and to name writing-related skills they have not yet mastered. The Writing Goals column also suggests that the instructor plans to help students achieve their writing goals rather than merely to trudge through the curriculum – a perception that must be honored. Leamson (1999) calls such strategic use of the first class meeting “getting down to business” or “hitting the ground running” (p. 85). First impressions set the tone for the term; and emphasizing respect, self-assessment, goal setting, effort, and writing during the first class meeting helps prepare students for the challenging work of writing – and for a rewarding academic experience overall.

SHOWING OFF: BEGINNING “SENTENCE WORK” WITH INDIRECT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Teachers may plan a sequence of grammar and punctuation lessons, or they may teach mini-lessons as the need arises. Either way, they often discover that native speakers of English are quite skilled in forming grammatical sentences. To take advantage of students’ considerable prior knowledge and to help them identify their “rusty” areas, I precede each sentence structure or punctuation lesson with a “Show Off” exercise of a half dozen items, asking students to work with a partner to manipulate sentences in relevant ways, “showing off” what they already know about the structure under consideration. Their interactions with each other and with the sentences help them gauge their skill levels. They may be pleased to discover that they have considerable mastery of commas in a series; they may come to the conclusion that they need to slow their reading speed when dealing with introductory phrases and clauses; or they may find that, in order to make sense of a sentence, they need to pay careful attention to essential/non-essential elements. Since the show-off exercises are not tests, students can use them to informally assess their skill levels, develop a sense of self-efficacy for mastery of a particular sentence structure, and make sometimes unconscious judgments regarding how much effort they will need to put into mastering the concept under consideration.

VISUALIZING THE GOAL: USING EXEMPLARS AND FOLLOWING A CHECKLIST

Being up-front with requirements is only fair, and my students have consistently named the availability of exemplary papers as one of the most helpful tools for successfully achieving an assignment’s learning outcomes. A model of an attainable goal can be very motivating, especially when the instructor takes the time to point out – or allows the students the time to discover – how an exemplar meets an assignment’s requirements. Exemplars are particularly effective when coupled with a clearly written grading checklist, another item my students repeatedly praise. A checklist detailing

a writing project's outcomes, the characteristic of each outcome, and the possible points awarded to each successful outcome has proved to be helpful to students. When students receive a checklist before they begin their drafts, they have the opportunity to take ownership of their writing's content and to assess their progress toward the required writing outcomes at the same time.

REFLECTING BEFORE CONSULTING: SELF-ASSESSMENT PRIOR TO PEER RESPONSE

English composition classes, Basic Writing included, often incorporate peer-response sessions, during which students respond to each other's drafts. My students frequently mention the value of such sessions, particularly if the pair or peer group stays on task. Nevertheless, to encourage more active and reflective participation, before such sessions begin, each writer completes the first two items on the "Peer Consultation Notes" form: "The point I originally wanted to make in this piece of writing," and "My thoughts and concerns about this writing BEFORE I consulted with a fellow writer." Item 1 is often the thesis statement, which is, of course, the writer's communication goal. Item 2, requiring some thought, is the writer's own direct assessment of the effectiveness of the draft. Immediately after the peer response session, students complete item 3, "My notes about my classmates' reaction to my writing." Item 4, "How I changed this piece of writing after our consultation," is completed before students submit their final drafts. These last two items encourage writers to work toward their goals, combining or contrasting their self-assessments with the apparent needs of the peer audience in order to achieve the goal of proving the points stated in their theses.

REFLECTING ON A MANUSCRIPT: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF A COMPLETED ESSAY

In addition to the Writer's Peer Consultation Notes, my students must complete an in-class seven-item reflection, which they include

in the packet that accompanies their final drafts. The first two items concern the motivation and the goals for the essay: “Why I chose this topic” and “The point I wanted to make in this essay.” The next three are direct self-assessments of the draft and of the student’s learning process: “The strengths of this essay,” “What I learned about my writing process,” and “I feel that I still need to work on this area.” The final two items may be considered indirect self-assessments, for they are the writer’s indication of areas in which he or she needed help and/or may still be struggling: “Acknowledgements” (thanks to those who helped the writer, with specific reference to how they assisted) and “My additional comments and/or questions I would like to ask a reader.” Although submitted on a form, several of the items in this “reflection” are not dissimilar to a book or article preface, created by professional authors just before they turn in their final manuscripts.

CONFERENCING: LOOKING BACK TO SET GOALS AND PLAN STRATEGIES

Although writing instructors often feel that the grades, comments, and/or advice they write on student papers are clear and informative, it has been my experience that students usually require some assistance interpreting teachers’ marginal comments, so conferencing with students individually is invaluable. During early-in-the-term conferences, students and teacher can discuss student achievement in terms of learning outcomes, such as focus, development, organization, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics. Then they can collaborate on setting goals in specific areas of concern and discuss the behavior needed to reach the goals within a reasonable time frame. For example, a student’s goal may be “Eliminate all fragments from my essays by mid term,” and the steps to reach the goal may include “Read my drafts aloud to myself and to the writing consultant from the last sentence in the essay, listening for fragments.” Such goal-setting may take the form of a simple chart with sections for the goal, deadline, and strategies; or the goal-setting exercise may be as elaborate as a formal essay detailing a student’s

writing goal plan, complete with dates, scheduled writing consulting appointments, acceptable number of errors, etc.

CONSISTENT SCAFFOLDING: CONTINUAL GOAL SETTING AND STRATEGY PLANNING

Vygotsky (1962) emphasized the need for teachers to patiently assist and cooperate with students as they learn new skills; this principle applies to the planful actions of self-assessment and goal-setting as well. Developmental students often require quite a bit of “assisted performance” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), and it is a matter of record that students often fail to use appropriate strategies consistently (Henderson & Cunningham, 1994); therefore, if goal-setting is to have a permanent effect on educational progress, it should become a regular feature of the teaching methodology (Lee & Gavine, 2003). Fortunately, drawing students’ attention to their learning processes and to the relationship between their achievement, their writing goals, and their behavior need not become a burden. For instance, after they are given a reasonable time to look over a graded paper, students may be asked to respond quickly on a note card to one or more of the following questions, or to other questions a teacher may design to help students seriously consider what they will “do with” their graded papers:

- My most frequent error(s) seems to be _____.
- Points I will keep in mind for future writing.
- When writing my next assignment, I will _____.
- Questions I have for the instructor

Another “quick-reminder activity” is to ask students to look over their most recent graded essay, reflecting silently upon their writing process and upon the paper’s successes and weaknesses. Students then jot down a brief list of the “strategies I used to write this assignment” and a list of the “strategies I will use for my next writing assignment,” with an emphasis upon what they will do differently. Typical plans may include “Go to the writing consultant. Take my time and don’t try to rush, ‘cause if you rush, there’s always something wrong with the paper.” “I will write about something a little less BORING! I

also will see a writing consultant before I start writing.” “I will use better punctuation and go over my papers better to make sure my sentences don’t have missing words and are more complete” – all good intentions. However, it is essential for the writers to follow their own advice, and they need some support. To provide this support, an effective teacher will hold brief, regular conferences to help students internalize the reality that successful college students reach their goals by following through with their thoughtful plans.

SUMMARIZING ACHIEVEMENT: THE WRITING-ASSESSMENT BUSINESS LETTER

Teachers who use portfolios often require students to write an essay or a cover letter reflecting on their progress as writers, and such assignments are effective even when the course does not include a portfolio. Fortunately for those who do this formal assessment in letter form, electronic templates within word processing programs have added an element of play. Since business letters can be relatively formulaic, it does not hurt to dictate the general contents of each paragraph, perhaps suggesting that the first paragraph be an overview of a student’s adjustment to college or growth as a writer, the second paragraph summarize specific areas of writing improvement (process and/or product), and the third paragraph recount a highlight of the semester and articulate goals/plans for further developing as a writer. Couching the final reflection/self-assessment and goal setting in a fun-to-write, neat-and-tidy business letter package can give students a sense of accomplishment/closure coupled with awareness that the next term is both a continuation of their learning and a fresh start.

LEAVING A LEGACY: A REFLECTIVE MEMO

The last day of the term should be a significant one, and creating a “legacy memo,” written to future writing students, can give current students one last opportunity to assess their achievements and strategies – and to take on the roles of “experts” as they connect with the students who soon will be joining the community of

college writers. This how-to-succeed-in-Basic-Writing assignment can be completed individually, in small groups, or as a class. The memo format lends itself to listing items of advice to next term's class. Although the list is somewhat like a confessional and a celebration – a practical compilation of “what I should have done” and “what worked for me” – this valuable assignment requires students to consider their writing and learning processes, to assess their achievement one more time, and to verbalize their strategies for a genuine audience – first-year students. With student permission, particularly pointed memos might be reproduced on various colors of paper and passed around the class during the first week of the next term, thus completing the cycle and once again emphasizing – from the beginning of the term – the significance of reflection, the importance of personal responsibility, and the authority of student writers.

DEVELOPING A MOTIVATING MINDSET

Many first-year students approach college with uncertainty, but the first day of Basic Writing class can be structured to help students realize that they are already experts who understand the tremendous effort it takes to succeed, whether in music, sports, hobbies, interpersonal relations, household management, or professional areas. Their new challenge is to think and act more like experienced writers. To help students come to know the sometimes hard-won joy of writing, perceptive instructors should encourage them to draw upon their past successes, to apply their self-assessment skills to the writing process, to set suitable writing goals, and to follow through with appropriate strategies. The process is an ongoing one; therefore, self-assessment and goal setting must be integral elements of the course – not occasional assignments, but vital aspects of Basic Writers' development, present every time they write. Ideally, these processes will become fundamental to our students' personal development as well – important features of a scholarly mindset, a mindset that constantly questions, probes, and challenges students to shape, to reach for, and to grasp their goals.

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Cooperative Study Groups: Give Your Students the Home Team Advantage

TONY LERMA

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT
BROWNSVILLE AND TEXAS
SOUTHMOST COLLEGE

In this article I discuss the factors that led me to implement study groups in the teaching of mathematics. An important influence in this decision began with an experimental study conducted with two College Algebra classes in which students were randomly assigned to treatment groups. While there was no statistical difference between the study groups on the posttest that was used to measure achievement, it is important to note the positive effect on the students. In addition, suggestions are given on how to implement cooperative study groups in your mathematics classroom.

At the age of 39, Jimmy Connors advanced to the semifinals of the 1991 U.S. Open Tennis Tournament. It was not an easy task as he had to come back from behind on three of his five matches. It was an incredible performance that might not have happened without the New York crowd and his team cheering Jimmy on every point. While Jimmy acknowledged that the New York crowd motivated him, he was quick to credit his entire team which included his coach, trainer, and hitting partners.

On January 3, 1993 the Buffalo Bills faced the Houston Oilers in the first round of the NFL playoffs. In the first half the Oilers played well and the Bills could not have played any worse as they were behind 28 – 3 at the half.

The momentum continued with the Oilers at the start of the second half as they took a 35 – 3 lead. However, with their home crowd cheering them on, the Bills found a way to win in overtime

to complete the greatest comeback in NFL history. Throughout the comeback, the Bills players on the field and those on the bench continued to cheer vivaciously in support. They still had to believe in each other and more importantly execute the plays called in order for the team to win.

On November 6, 2004 the Texas Longhorns came back from a 28-point deficit late in the first half to defeat the Oklahoma St. Cowboys 56 – 35. The momentum generated by the home crowd was a tremendous advantage according to the participants.

Most of the major upsets and comebacks in professional or amateur sports occur in front of home crowds. The home advantage is often clear, with even the potentially weaker teams winning when playing at home. One reason for the home team advantage is the psychological support of the fans in attendance. This support often provides that extra motivation that a team needs in order to be successful. However, players must be committed to the tasks that are assigned to them in order for the team to succeed. In addition, team members must focus on a winning attitude and continue to support each other no matter what the circumstances.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The support and encouragement that an athlete receives can also be advantageous for the student who is trying to succeed in a mathematics course. It is for this reason that I strongly encourage my students to form cooperative study groups in all of my classes. Cooperative learning is the instructional practice of placing students into small groups, or teams, and having them work together toward a common goal. Each member of the team is responsible, not only for learning what is taught, but also for helping teammates learn.

I was not always an advocate of cooperative learning groups. There was a time when I thought that allowing students to work in groups was a way of permitting them to cheat. However, as I experimented with the idea and reviewed the literature, I became a believer.

The American Mathematical Association of Two-Year Colleges (AMATYC) Standards (Cohen, 1995) suggest the need for learner centered approaches, such as cooperative learning groups, in mathematics education.

Cooperative learning has been a subject of interest to researchers for the last several decades and some research findings indicate that cooperative learning is an effective tool for improving academic achievement (Leikin & Zaslavsky, 1997). At the K-12 school levels, instruction using cooperative learning techniques has grown in popularity, and there is a substantial body of research supporting the idea that students can attain higher achievement, especially in mathematics, through working together in small groups (Sutton, 1992).

One very important benefit of cooperative learning is that it enhances a student's self esteem which in turn motivates the student to be more involved in the learning process (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Cooperative interactions among students result in a higher degree of accomplishment for all participants (Slavin, 1987). By helping each other, students form a support system which raises the performance level of each member (Kagan, 1986). By actively working together to create new understandings and learning, students realize that members will work to help and support their efforts, and it is this sense of group cohesiveness that enhances a student's motivation to achieve both the individual goals and the goals of the group (Johnson & Johnson, 2003).

Through small groups, students are expected to work to maximize their own and each other's learning. Class members are assigned to groups based on academic abilities or through random assignment. They then work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members gain from each other's accomplishments. In cooperative learning situations there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainments; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals (Deutsch, 1962; Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

Students have told me that when they participate in cooperative study groups, they are part of a huge support system. Just as athletes are encouraged by their teammates and the cheering fans, students also encourage each other to succeed. As the instructor, I am the biggest fan because I want all my students to be successful.

THE EXPERIMENT AND MODEL

While I initially recommended that my students form study groups to prepare themselves for tests, I took a more structured approach toward cooperative study groups when I conducted an experimental study with two college algebra classes in order to examine the effects of cooperative study groups upon achievement in College Algebra. The model that I used for the study is given below.

1. Students are randomly assigned to work and learn together in small groups of four members. The groups are expected to stay intact for the entire semester.
2. Each group submits one set of solutions to an assignment and each member of the group receives the same score on the assignment. This applied to all homework assigned during the semester and occasional in-class assignments.
3. Each member of the group is expected to contribute.
4. Cooperation is an essential element and is strongly encouraged.
5. Group members are expected to submit informal periodic reports discussing the group's activities. The reports are submitted every other week. Members take turns with this responsibility. It was through these reports that I collected most of the information concerning the group members' attitudes toward cooperative learning and whether there were any issues that needed my attention.
6. Group members can vote to remove a member from the group who is not doing his/her share of the work.
7. Individual grades are also assigned. Students are expected to work individually on major exams.

THE SUBJECTS

Students in two College Algebra classes were randomly assigned to treatment groups. The random assignment to groups was done after the twelfth class day. There were three groups of four students in each class. Twenty-four students comprised the experimental group. Twenty-six students not assigned to a cooperative study group comprised the control group. Therefore, each class consisted of students that were members of a study group and some that were not. Most of the work accomplished by the study groups was done in sessions outside of class. This consisted of working on homework assignments and studying for tests.

METHODOLOGY

Each student in the experimental study was exposed to the same instructional approach. This consisted of a lecture-discussion delivery where students took notes and asked questions. Both classes were given the same homework assignments and chapter tests. It is important to note that each student was aware that some individuals were working in a group and some were not. I was the instructor for both College Algebra classes involved in the experimental study.

THE RESULTS AND NOTES

The statistical analysis indicated no significant difference in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the posttest that was used to measure achievement at the .05 level ($t = -0.381$, $p = .706$). The descriptive statistics for the posttest means of the study groups are presented in Table 1. The mean given is the number correct out of 34 problems.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Posttest Results

	Mean Grade	Standard Deviation
Experimental Group	24.44	2.85
Control Group	25.13	6.10

While there was no significant difference in the means, the standard deviation does suggest that there was less variability in the

posttest scores of the experimental group. This can be attributed to the fact that these students spent more time working problems and studying together. In general,

- Students who worked in study groups seemed to be more involved in class discussions.
- Students who worked in study groups reported positive experiences.
- Some students who worked in study groups reported that the support that they received from the other members was an important factor in not dropping the class.

In subsequent semesters, I continued to encourage my students to form study groups to help each other with homework assignments and to study for tests.

During a three-semester period, I continued to collect data in several classes where students were strongly encouraged to form cooperative learning study groups. This data was compared to similar classes that were not encouraged to form cooperative study groups.

The data was collected from four courses that I taught on a regular basis, Math 1314 (College Algebra), Math 1325 (Business Calculus), Math 1332 (Math for Liberal Arts), and a developmental course, Math 0422 (Intermediate Algebra). The success rates for classes that utilized cooperative learning groups and for those that did not are compared in Figure 1. The success rates reflect the percent of students that made at least a C in the course. This includes results for all students registered after the twelfth class day.

As indicated in Figure 1, the study group classes had a higher success rate. Furthermore, those students that did work in study groups appeared to enjoy the class more and were more active in class activities. In addition, the periodic reports submitted and comments made on the student evaluation of the instructor included positive comments. The only negative comments were made by a few students concerning the issue of appropriate meeting times for the group. Initially the groups encountered conflicts with work schedules and/or class schedules. However, these issues were eventually resolved.

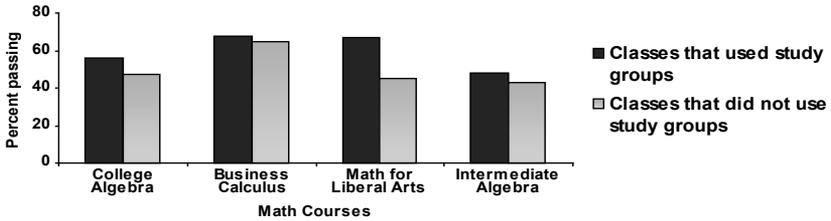


Figure 1. *Comparison of the use of study groups in several math courses*

One very important fact that I have noticed during this period of encouraging my students to form cooperative study groups, is the improvement in the retention rate. In the classes in which students formed cooperative study groups, the retention rate improved by about 5%. Comments made by students indicated that the early success that they experienced because of the group activities and the support given by the group members was an important factor in not dropping the class. Early success in the course led to an increased level of confidence.

Students in general reported that

- Their study skills improved.
- They felt more comfortable asking questions in a group setting.
- Explaining mathematical concepts to each other helped them become better learners.
- Support from group members encouraged them to stay focused.
- They counted on each other for help.

IMPLEMENTING STUDY GROUPS

There are a few things to keep in mind if you plan to implement cooperative study groups in the teaching of mathematics. Groups should consist of three or four students. Mix the students within a group according to academic abilities. This can be done by assigning a student to a group based on the performance on a pretest or exam. I usually wait until the twelfth class day before creating the groups. I use a pretest to determine the composition

of the groups. I have also randomly assigned students to groups.

Once the groups are formed, students are given class time to obtain contact information from each other and select a group leader. The group leader is responsible for deciding on the most appropriate time to meet and for scheduling the group sessions. I recommend to my students that this responsibility should be rotated throughout the semester. I keep the groups intact for the entire semester.

My main responsibility in the cooperative learning process is to provide guidance and ensure that each student is participating in the group's activities. However, there were situations where I had to take a more active role so that the study group could perform more efficiently. For example, in the experimental study discussed earlier, one of the study groups had a problem with one student who was either always late or not showing up to the study sessions. They reluctantly kept the student in the group and allowed him to benefit from the group's work. However, the time came when they had enough and reported the situation to me. While the group had the authority to remove the student from the group, they left it up to me to do the dirty work.

Once a student is removed from a group, that student is on his/her own for any remaining assignments. The student, however, retains any grades received earlier while a member of the study group.

The periodic reports mentioned earlier, serve as minutes for the group's sessions and keep me updated on the group activities. These informal reports are submitted every other week by one of the group members and must be signed by all members. The reports simply detail the activities of the group sessions such as time and place where the group met, duration of the meetings, a brief overview of the meetings, and problems or concerns that the group encounters. Members take turns submitting these reports to me. I used the data from these reports to determine the role of each student during the study sessions.

Most of group sessions are held outside of class where the study groups work on homework assignments or study for tests. Occasionally, I do assign group projects in class. This allows me to have first-hand knowledge of the level of participation of each student.

The in-class projects count as homework grades which accounts for 30% of the semester grade. The in-class project usually involves solving three or four problems from the lecture and is assigned the last 15 or 20 minutes of the class period. Each group member receives the same grade on all group assignments, however all students work individually on the exams. If a student is not doing his/her share of the work during the group session, it will be evident when I grade their exam.

CONCLUSION

Having students form study groups has been advantageous for me. With some of the students from the study groups taking such an active leadership role, it is like having teaching assistants. Furthermore, I have fewer papers to grade and thus more time to prepare for class.

During the period that I have been implementing the use of cooperative learning groups in my classroom, I have noticed that most students enjoy the opportunity to work together in groups. In addition, there is a vast improvement in students' attitude, attendance, completion of assignments, and class participation. Students in study groups realize that they are not alone and appreciate the help, support, and motivation that they receive from their group members.

Cooperative learning is based on the belief that learning is most effective when students are actively involved in the sharing of ideas and work cooperatively to complete the assigned tasks. I have found that a student working in groups is provided with a sense of support and I will continue to provide this type of learning environment for my students.

Just like the athlete coming from behind, the task is made easier when there is someone cheering you on. In cooperative study groups, the teammates and instructor cheer for each other as they work together. Give your students the support system that will give them a better opportunity to succeed by giving students the home team advantage!

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The Road Less Traveled: Poetry and Videotape in a Developmental Reading Class

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Developmental reading students respond positively to poetry. This genre engages them and intimidates less than prose. Reading poetry aloud further improves their reading skills because students feel compelled to increase their knowledge and abilities and to pay closer attention to the text when they are required to perform. Videotaping performances heightens this desire to read well and allows students to assess their abilities when viewing the tape.

Poetry is a powerful tool educators use to instill knowledge and appreciation of the English language in their students. It can be used with great effect with developmental students. In 2002, 11% of all college students were enrolled in developmental reading (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003). Given the high number of students who need help in this area and the fact that many developmental students are not always motivated learners, it is critical to find ways to engage them. But poetry is often underutilized in the developmental classroom and courses that do teach poetry rarely take advantage of the performance element that is part of the genre. Reading, analyzing, and discussing poetry is only the first step. Reading poetry aloud makes students read more carefully and pay closer attention to the poems and their various elements. Videotaping students' oral reading of poetry only increases their focus on the literature. Taping students reading poetry aloud greatly enhances their learning experiences in the developmental reading classroom.

READING AND TAPING POETRY

Why teach poetry? Poetry is effective because students often find it more interesting and less intimidating than prose. The genre works particularly well with developmental students who are not comfortable with reading and cringe at the thought of having to read a whole book. Reading an entire book is a daunting task, but reading a poem, even if it is several pages in length, is infinitely more feasible. Additionally, poetry appeals to many of our students who grew up with hip hop and rap music. They like the rhythm and rhyme of poetry. And the fact that the meaning of a poem is subjective makes them comfortable too because there is no one “right” answer. (Of course this is true with prose as well, but most students have been so conditioned to find the “correct answer” when reading prose that they cannot believe that all forms of literature are subjective.) All of these factors help to engage our students and make them more at ease with the written word.

Reading poetry opens up a whole new world for students. While most poetry assignments start and stop with silent reading, the genre lends itself to being read aloud. Indeed, many poems were written for oral performance. Reading aloud in class forces students to pay closer attention to the poems in front of them, if for no other reason than they are performing in front of their peers. By reading aloud students can hear themselves which helps them identify problems and monitor progress (Opitz, Rasinki, & Bird, 1998). Oral reading gives students a deeper appreciation of the way a poem sounds, its rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and other elements. It makes reading the poem a richer experience for the reader and allows his peers to enjoy it as an audience. Reading aloud improves students’ confidence and competence (Ash, 2002). To heighten this effect and to give students an opportunity to view their work and improvement, videotaping readers is a fun way to get students excited about reading.

THE POETRY PROJECT

During the spring 2007 term we conducted a study to determine how students reacted to reading aloud and to being videotaped

reading aloud. The students in one developmental reading class were our subjects. This reading course is designed to introduce students to strategies needed for college-level reading. Although we started with 16 students, only eight were able to complete the course. The class began a poetry unit approximately at midterm. The reading teacher was assisted by a colleague who helped design and implement the study. Both instructors were regularly in the classroom throughout the term. By mid semester they had built a rapport with the students and the students were comfortable with them and with each other. This made it easier for the students to read aloud in class and, ultimately, before a video camera. The poetry unit started with several sessions of discussion and analysis. Students were given a number of poems to analyze, both individually and in groups. They were instructed to look for imagery, similes, metaphors, new vocabulary, symbolism, and other elements. The poems they analyzed also served as topics for their writing journals. Students were able to work through the poems with their peers and then could reflect on the poetry in writing.

Once the students had been introduced to poetry, they were required to choose their own poems. They were instructed to pick a poem they would analyze, discuss, write about, and read aloud. This part of the assignment began with a trip to the library. Many of our students (especially those in their first semester of college) had never been to the campus library and were unfamiliar with how it “works.” A class visit to the library got them into the building and gave us an opportunity to show them where the various types of books were located and how to use the online catalogue. Students were told to choose a poem they liked and felt comfortable with. Since the poems they looked at tended to be brief, they often read several before choosing one that they liked. Once they had decided on a poem, they were required to check out the book it was in and were encouraged to examine the book as a whole and gain a general understanding of the author and his work.

The next phase of the assignment was for the class to gather in a circle and talk about the poems, authors, and books they had

chosen. During these discussions, students were allowed to read their poems if they wished. Listening to both the poetry and the discussion helped them develop listening comprehension and vocabulary. Several students eagerly volunteered to read, while others did not want to read at all. The instructors took part in this exercise discussing their poems and reading them aloud modeling good reading and verbalization skills. This practice allowed students to read in a supportive environment which increased their comfort and competence in reading. The instructors' participation demonstrated several things for the students: possible elements to analyze in a poem, types of questions to ask, and how to read poetry orally. This exercise also exposed students to different poets and different types of poetry. One of the highlights of this activity was that several of our international students read or recited poems in their native languages. Thus, we were treated to poetry in Spanish, Arabic, and Korean. This was an especially valuable experience for the native Arkansans who had never strayed far from their rural homes.

WRITING POETRY

Students were next asked to use what they learned in these class discussions to write their own poems. The assignment was very general. They were given a theme that related to their ability to take control of their lives. Students were told they would have an opportunity to read their work aloud before a video camera if they wished to. Our students enjoyed writing poetry. Although some of their poems were simplistic, others showed effort and careful thought. Some students had already written poetry or rap music on their own and welcomed the chance to do it as a class assignment. The influence of rap could be seen in the rhythms of some of the poems and again later in the students' performances of their work.

Poetry writing was a popular assignment because students liked the flexibility of poetry - the lack of a fixed length, the discretion of using meter and rhyme, etc. And they appreciated the subject because it was one that they knew well, themselves, their development, and their potential. While some of the student work

was shallow and silly, some of it was very expressive and personal. Our students' poetry gave us insights into their lives and helped us appreciate what rough backgrounds some of them come from. Through their poetry they showed us how frightening both college and early adulthood can be. Sharing their feelings gave the students ownership of the class. They felt vested in it. Additionally, writing their own poetry took the mystique out of the genre for some of them and made them more at ease with the poems they read and heard in class.

READING POETRY ALOUD

To prepare our students for the final phase of the unit, reading poetry aloud before a video camera, we played them an episode of the HBO program *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. The show featured a variety of poets reading their work. Students were told to focus on the poets' presentation: their enunciation, pace, body movements, facial expressions, etc. Afterwards we discussed reading poetry as a type of performance asking them to think about how they would read their poem to bring out its meaning and emotion.

Students were required to read aloud the poems they had chosen before a video camera and were also allowed to read poems they had written if they wanted. To reduce student anxiety, they were not graded on their performances but were merely given participation points for completing the exercise. Students were informed that this would be the case when the videotaping activity was first discussed. But knowing they were going to be taped and that the tape would later be played to the entire class, most students rehearsed and carefully read their poems. They paid attention to enunciation, pronunciation, and rhythm. They also showed a greater interest in comprehending their poems and in being able to analyze them. In short, they read with much more attention and care, both in rehearsal and when performing on camera, than they ever would have if they had just read the poems silently. For example, students were more concerned with the poems' vocabulary – they no longer ignored the words they did not know. They had to at least know how

to pronounce unfamiliar words and they usually wanted to know their meanings. This knowledge made them more comfortable with their poems and thus more prepared to perform them. Similarly, they wanted to make sure they understood their poems and so their comprehension increased. Oral reading also directed them to notice the rhyme patterns of poetry and try to capture them in their presentations. Reading aloud before a camera forced our students to pay closer attention to the texts they were working with.

When everyone had been taped reading, we viewed the tape together as a class. Watching the tape gave the students an opportunity to see and hear themselves recite the poems they had chosen. They were able to listen and determine what was good and bad about their performances and were able to learn from their mistakes. Although students were sometimes critical of themselves, they were very supportive and encouraging of their peers. Everyone found it entertaining and watching the tape proved to be a welcome break at the end of the semester.

ASSESSMENT

The final step was to survey the class about their reactions to poetry in general and to the various exercises we did with poetry. The surveys were anonymous and our students were encouraged to be honest. We were pleasantly surprised with the results. Only one student reported hating poetry, hated reading it silently or aloud, and did not like being videotaped. Although a few other students had some negative comments, the majority were neutral or positive about the poetry unit and the exercises within it. Several students commented that they learned about themselves as readers because of the videotaping – it made them aware of their weaknesses. Unfortunately we had only eight students in the course by the end of the poetry unit to survey. But six of the eight reported that the video taping exercise made them better readers. And one of the dissenters claimed that the exercise did not improve his reading ability because he did not practice enough at home. The majority felt the activity allowed them to see and hear how well they read and to identify areas in which they needed improvement.

When we first developed the idea of videotaping students reading poetry aloud, we tested the waters by posting a query on a listserv dedicated to teaching developmental students. We were surprised that the small number of respondents all vehemently opposed the idea. They made dire predictions about crushing our students' fragile egos. Students who could not read well would hate reading aloud and would refuse to do it in front of a video camera. In fact the opposite was true. Generally, the poorest readers in the class enjoyed the video exercise the most, albeit for the wrong reasons. These students tended to have behavioral problems and constantly demanded attention from their instructors and fellow students. Putting them in front of a camera fed this need. They loved performing and being able to watch themselves later. None of the students in this category were the least bit concerned with their reading ability or lack thereof.

IMPROVEMENTS

Although our project went well and we were satisfied with the results, there is always room for improvement. The next time we videotape students reading we plan to tape them more often. Because of time constraints we only had two taping sessions and viewed the entire tape as a class at the end of the poetry unit. Because of the small number of students, everyone had the chance to read at least once. But they would have benefited from additional tapings. More frequent videotaping and viewing of their performances would have allowed each student to better assess his work, monitor his progress, and build his confidence. Students would have more opportunity to see their growth as readers. Additionally, we would like to experiment with videotaping students reading genres besides poetry. When surveyed, our students indicated they would like to read speeches, plays, news articles, and short stories, among other things, before the camera. To some extent the type of material read is unimportant; viewing their taped performances allows students to assess their strengths and weaknesses regardless of what they read. It would be nice to give students a greater choice of materials to read

before the camera. This would give students more opportunities to read something they were interested in and enjoyed while still achieving the ultimate goal – to improve reading proficiency.

IMPLICATIONS

These poetry exercises, like the entire course, have a higher goal: to enable students to read on a college level. Reading poetry aloud and before a video camera develops skills that students can apply to their reading assignments in any course. Firstly, these activities help students become more focused readers. By having to read aloud students are forced to read every word; they become aware of which words and concepts they do not understand and realize the importance of elements such as word order, punctuation, change of font or font size, use of bold, italics, underline, etc. They learn how to identify what problems they have with the text and how to overcome those difficulties. These abilities are crucial for any type of reading.

Similarly, these reading exercises improve students' ability to analyze a text. Bearing the responsibility of reading before an audience and a camera made our students want to understand their poems. As a result they paid close attention to the words and their meanings, asked many questions about the text, and discussed the text's meaning. Rather than giving it a cursory skim and taking the words at face value, they engaged in critical thinking and tried to determine the author's intent as well as their own personal interpretation of the texts. These are skills that are necessary to read any college level textbook.

CONCLUSION

Developmental students are often reluctant to read. Therefore, it is crucial to find a way to reach and engage them. If they are not interested in the reading material, many of them simply will not read. Threats of failure, having to repeat the course, or even expulsion due to poor grades have little effect. But many of these same students respond positively to poetry. They do not consider it

to be boring or threatening - responses they often have to prose.

Reading, writing, and discussing poetry help students develop their reading and analytical skills in a manner that is comfortable for many of them. Videotaping them reading poetry adds another layer: it forces them to pay closer attention to all aspects of the poems they are working with. Comprehension, vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation all take on new importance when students realize they will read their poems aloud; these elements have even greater significance when that reading is taped. In addition, the videotaping exercise lets students contribute to the course and gives them some ownership of the class. By the time we reached this final phase of the poetry unit, students had worked with their poems a great deal, were familiar with them, and were often anxious to be taped reading them and to share their performances with the class.

Of course reading poetry, reading it aloud, and videotaping are not panaceas. None of these tools can reach every student or solve every problem. There will always be some students who will hate one or more of these activities and be reluctant to participate. But that is true of every assignment and every text. Given the strong positive response from our students, especially from some of our poorest readers, it is apparent that the advantages of using the taping exercise far outweigh the disadvantages. Videotaping students reading poetry may be the road less traveled, but for our students it is one that has made a tremendous difference.

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Student Voices: The Literacy Histories of Developmental Reading Students in a South Texas College

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The purpose of this study was to develop a profile of the literacy histories of developmental reading students enrolled in a South Texas college. A literacy history questionnaire was used to collect written responses regarding the students' early literacy experiences prior to entering the college setting. Analysis of the written responses indicated that the students had a positive attitude towards reading during elementary school which declined as they moved into the upper grades. The positive aspect of the results is that the students did not have an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards reading, thus leaving their instructors with the opportunity of helping them develop a more positive attitude towards reading in general. Suggestions for classroom practice will be discussed.

Every semester students enter our developmental reading program with expectations of improving their reading and study skills so they can achieve academic success in the reading intensive courses that await them. Yet we find in our classroom many students who are unmotivated and often reluctant to engage in their reading assignments, much less ready to apply the reading and study strategies covered in class. The question we ask ourselves each semester is “why?” Why are these students who tell us they want to improve their reading and study skills so unmotivated to achieve their expressed goals? The answer might lie in understanding the type of literacy experiences the students may have had prior to entering our developmental reading classrooms.

Often a set of scores from a standardized exam is the only information developmental reading instructors have about their students' reading backgrounds. The information gleaned from these scores tells us whether or not our students mastered a particular reading skill but provides no information regarding possible explanations for their reading deficiencies such as language barriers, learning disabilities, or overall attitude towards reading. Most of the research conducted on developmental reading students over the last twenty years has focused mainly on various strategies for improving reading comprehension and higher order thinking skills (Boylan, 2000; Taraban, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2000). However, research on the prior literacy experiences of developmental reading students and how these experiences affect their reading abilities or overall attitude towards reading in general is limited. Research studies conducted on lower grade level students have shown that the literacy experiences students have at home and at school play a major role in their future reading success (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Kuo, Franke, Regalado, & Halfon, 2004). If these experiences are positive, students will continue to engage in reading activities thus improving their reading skills, but if the experiences are negative, the more likely result will be disengagement with reading which could eventually lead to deficiencies in reading skills and the development of negative reading attitudes (Mathewson, 1994). Research indicates that developmental reading students lack motivation to read because of negative experiences with literacy prior to attending a college setting (Allgood, Risko, Alvarez, & Fairbanks, 2000). Therefore, if developmental reading students are entering our programs with negative literacy experiences, then listening to the students' own voices about those experiences can help developmental reading instructors design instructional approaches that can turn the students' negative experiences into positive ones and provide them with a better opportunity for achieving academic success.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

A study on developmental reading students' literacy histories was

conducted at a South Texas university in the fall of 2005. A sample of 100 randomly selected developmental reading students was selected from the institution's developmental reading program to participate in the study. Information gathered from a demographic survey indicated that 97 students identified themselves as Hispanic, one identified himself as non-Hispanic, and two identified themselves as African-American or Black. With regard to language primarily spoken, 46 indicated speaking mostly Spanish, while 54 indicated speaking mostly English. Fifty-six of the participants were female and 44 were male.

METHODOLOGY

A literacy history questionnaire created by Vogt and Shearer (2003) was used to collect written responses to thirteen prompts regarding their early literacy experiences at home and at school (see Appendix). The one-hundred participants completed the literacy history questionnaire during the eighth week of classes in the fall semester of 2005. Participants who were absent or who declined to participate in the study were randomly replaced using a random table of numbers until the desired sample number was achieved (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). Because the developmental reading program at the institution consists of computer-directed instruction (CDI) courses and instructor-based courses, all developmental reading instructors and CDI Reading Lab staff were provided with instructions for administering the questionnaire. The students were given one week to complete the questionnaire and return it to their instructor. The researcher collected completed questionnaires for data analysis.

Each of the participants' handwritten responses to the thirteen literacy history prompts were analyzed and then categorized according to similar key words and phrases as suggested by Bogdan and Bilken (1992). Only questions 2, 9, 10, and 13 will be discussed because they provide information directly related to whether or not the students had positive or negative literacy experiences at home and at school and how these experiences made them feel about

themselves as readers and writers. Some of the students' comments including grammatical and mechanical errors were quoted verbatim from their handwritten responses.

QUESTION 2: *WERE YOU READ TO AS A CHILD? IF YES, BY WHOM? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT BEING READ TO?*

Some students recalled being read to by various relatives such as their parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, or their teachers. Most of the experiences appeared to be enjoyable. Some students noted that their mothers read with enthusiasm and expressions, thus making the experience "interesting." One student recalled a reading experience with her mom: "I remember that she would tuck me in bed and then she would start getting into each character and she would act out the story with different voices." Some students recalled specific books that relatives read to them. For example, one student wrote about her brother reading to her at bedtime: "It was about the Beauty and the Beast. He read it to me in a way that I could imagine what he was talking about." Another student recalled his grandmother telling him stories outside on her porch: "I remember that we would both sit outside of the house in a little porch and she would start telling me about these Mexican stories. Sometimes those stories wouldn't let me sleep." Some students also recalled being read fairy tales and other stories in Spanish instead of English. Several students also recalled being read to by their teachers, which the students described as enjoyable or positive experiences. One student wrote, "I used to like the way my teachers used to read to me with expressions and all," and another noted that "it was fun."

Of the students in the sample who responded "no" to being read to as a child, a few elaborated on the circumstances as to why they were not read to. For example, one student wrote, "My parents would always work. My dad had a graveyard shift he worked 13 hours a day and when he got home he would sleep. My mom worked at a restaurant so we never had any reading done as a child." A couple of students simply indicated that no one ever read to them as children.

QUESTION 9: *HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL? JUNIOR HIGH? HIGH SCHOOL?*

The general consensus of the students seemed to indicate that their feelings toward reading were more positive during elementary school than junior or high school. Most of the overall comments made by the students were “it was fun,” “I liked to read,” “I felt smart,” “I enjoyed it,” and “I liked it because of points.” Other comments made by the students also revealed their dislike for reading in elementary school because of reading problems or difficulty reading in English. For example, one student wrote, “In elementary reading was very hard. Kids would laugh at my accent.” Similarly, another student wrote, “I was inberset [embarrassed] because I didn’t read good.” A few of the others simply stated that they did not like to read at all, while a couple of others mentioned that they grew less and less interested in reading as they moved through the grade levels.

Most of the students’ responses about their feelings toward reading in junior high were negative. Some of their overall comments included, “It was difficult,” “It was boring,” “I wouldn’t or I didn’t read,” “I hated to read,” and “I read because I had to.” One student’s observation about reading in junior high school was, “It was not fun because you had to read out loud and the kids would make fun of you.” Some students did indicate that their feelings toward reading changed for the better upon entering junior high school. One student wrote, “I really didn’t like to read because I had problems reading but coming to junior high I start to like it a little more because I was getting the hang of it.” The students’ responses about how they felt about reading in high school were divided. Of those who did respond, a little more than half indicated that they did not like reading in high school. Some of their comments were “I didn’t like it,” “It was boring,” “I didn’t read any books,” “I didn’t feel anything,” and “It was difficult.” The other half of the students began to like reading again in high school. For example, one student wrote, “In high school I like that because reading takes you to another level,” while another student remarked that she began to like reading again because she was made to read.

QUESTION 10: DID YOUR READING/WRITING ABILITY IMPACT YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT YOURSELF AS A PERSON? IF SO, HOW?

Some of the students indicated that their literacy abilities did affect them positively in that they became better readers or writers. For example, one student noted, "Studying has gotten less difficult," while another remarked, "I increased my vocabulary and learned to write." A couple of students remarked that reading or writing did help them feel better about themselves. One student wrote, "Yes it did writing helped me by being able to write down the feelings I had inside of me and made me feel more relaxed and not depressed." Another student made an interesting remark about reading and her culture: "I believe that reading helps my speech and I like that. Although I am a Mexican-American I don't like having that accent many here have." Several students indicated that their literacy abilities did affect them but in a negative way. Some of the comments made by the students referred to their weaknesses in reading or writing. One student wrote, "I guess yes because made me feel inferior to those people that can express themselves so fluently on paper or that can read and understand what they read." The remaining students who responded about how their literacy abilities impacted their feelings simply wrote "no." Only one student remarked on whether her literacy abilities affected how she felt about herself as a person. She wrote, "No, because no matter your situation you should feel confident about yourself."

QUESTION 13: ARE YOU A READER/WRITER NOW? IF SO, DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A READER; IF NOT, WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE THIS IS SO? WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING? WRITING?

Most of the students who indicated they were readers or writers now referred to their academics. Many of the responses indicated they were reading or writing in their classes in one form or another. Several students remarked about the reading and writing done in their writing classes. Most of the students had to write essays or summaries in response to their readings.

A few students wrote about their recreational experiences with reading and writing. For example, one student stated that she liked reading because it “is a good way for to learn more about the places. If I don’t go to different places of the world, I can read about it and imagine the place.”

A few students described themselves as writers but in their native language. One student wrote, “I am a writer, but I write more in Spanish, because it is my first language. If I have to read or write in English I’m death, because I don’t have many vocabulary.”

Overall, most of the students who indicated they were not readers or writers remarked that they simply did not like to read or write, weren’t good at it, or weren’t interested in it. A couple of the students reflected about why they weren’t readers or writers and what they would do differently. For example, one student wrote:

“I am not a reader or writer. I suppose this is because no one in my family is. But I think that if I had someone in my childhood that had read to me at least for a bedtime story I would of probably think different or like reading. But I am really working on it because I have to, and wouldn’t like for my child to pass through the same difficulties that I did.”

DISCUSSION

The results of the literacy history questionnaire indicated that participants’ early home and school experiences with literacy were enjoyable and interesting, and their views about reading were positive, but as they moved into middle school and high school, those experiences became less interesting and boring, and their views toward reading became less than positive. This finding is supported by prior research which stated that as children move through the grade levels their attitudes toward reading tend to decline (Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985; Dwyer & Joy, 1980; Fitzgibbons, 1997; Parker & Paradis, 1986; Smith, 1990). It is possible that students’ overall attitude towards reading is the result of years of reading passages in preparation for state-mandated tests. As the students begin testing in third grade, it is likely that their teachers

move away from providing the students with rich literacy experiences and move into the more formulaic reading practice passages in preparation for state-mandated tests (Harlen & Crick, 2003; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). The positive aspect of the results is that the students did not have an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards reading, thus leaving their instructors with the opportunity of helping them develop a more positive attitude towards reading in general.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

By using instruments such as the literacy history questionnaire, developmental reading instructors can obtain valuable insight into the literacy experiences their students had prior to entering their classrooms. The rich details gathered from this type of questionnaire can provide instructors with information as to how the students feel about reading and writing in general and can be used as a literacy foundation upon which to develop classroom activities that can enhance the reading and writing experiences of their students. For example, in an effort to promote the importance of literacy in our classrooms, we have our developmental reading students collect and donate children's books to a community-sponsored Halloween event, in which the books are given as Halloween treats to the children instead of candy. The students also get to participate in the event and hand out the books to the children. Other strategies for enhancing students' attitudes towards reading include having the instructor act as a role model by imparting his or her enthusiasm for reading to the students. Simply telling students that reading is important is not enough. The instructor should share books that he or she has been reading and conduct read-alouds with the students. "When students listen to a teacher read, they are receiving a message that reading is important" (Ecroyd, 1991, p. 77). Read-alouds are also beneficial to second language learners who need to hear models of what good reading sounds like and can also provide an opportunity for discussing vocabulary orally in class. Other activities we have used in the classroom include conducting book talks,

book projects and using literature circles. Students should also have opportunities to share what they have been reading with their classmates through these types of activities which allow students to share their reading interests and can provide them with choices in reading, thus enhancing the value they attach to the reading act. Developmental reading instructors should also incorporate cooperative learning activities, such as using literature circles, which allow students to share and discuss their readings with their classmates in a positive, collaborative and risk free environment, which is especially beneficial for the second language learners (Tyler, 1993).

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the literacy experiences of the developmental reading students played a major role in the development of their reading attitudes. As prior research had found, regardless of how positive these experiences were when the students were in elementary school, as they moved across the grade levels these attitudes tended to decline. In addition to enhancing our students' cognitive skills, we must also listen to our students' voices so we can create positive literacy experiences for them to incorporate into their personal lives, as well as their academic lives. Strategies for developing positive attitudes in developmental reading students must become an explicit part of the developmental reading curriculum if the goal is to improve their academic reading and study skills and to develop lifelong readers. As we learn more about the literacy experiences of our students, the opportunity to develop effective curriculum and programs that go beyond addressing the cognitive skills of the students will become apparent.

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APPENDIX**LITERACY HISTORY PROMPTS**

The following questions will help you create a literacy (reading/writing) history by helping you remember and reflect on your early literacy development. The information you provide about your literacy development will help you understand how it impacts you today as a reader and writer. Please write your answers on the paper provided.

1. What are your earliest memories of reading and writing?
2. Were you read to as a child? By whom? What do you remember about being read to?
3. Did you read or write with your brothers or sisters or friends?
4. Did you have books, newspapers, and/or magazines in your home? Did you subscribe to any children's magazines? Did your parents or other family members maintain a personal library? Did they read for pleasure?
5. Can you remember seeing family members making lists and receiving or sending mail? Did you send or receive mail (e.g., birthday cards, thank-you notes, letters) when you were a child?
6. Did you go to the library as a child? If so, what do you remember about going to the library? When (at what age) did you get your first library card?
7. Can you remember teachers, learning experiences, or educational materials from elementary, middle, and high school? How did these influence your reading and writing abilities?
8. Do you remember the first book you loved (couldn't put down)? Do you remember reading/writing as a pleasurable experience? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
9. How did you feel about reading in elementary school? Junior high? High school?
10. Did your reading/writing ability impact your feelings about yourself as a person? If so, how?

11. Did you read a certain type of book (i.e., mysteries, biographies, science fiction, romance) at a particular age? Why did you choose these types of books to read?
12. What is your all-time favorite children's book? Novel? Nonfiction work? Why?
13. Are you a reader/writer now? If so, describe yourself as a reader; if not, why do you suppose this is so? What are you currently reading? Writing?

From Maryellen Vogt & Brenda A. Shearer. *Reading Specialists in the Real World: A Sociocultural View*. Published by Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA. Copyright © 2003 by Pearson Education. Adapted by permission of the publisher.

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The Style of Which This is Written: Neutralization of Prepositions in English

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We have noticed a change in the use of prepositions in English. In our work with student essays, we increasingly encounter non-standard uses of prepositions, such as concern on, afraid from, and enamored with. This trend is evident in both native and non-native American English speakers. We believe that the English prepositional system is moving towards an eventual neutralization of the distinction in the prepositional category. Parallels are evident in the variability of prepositions in Old English, as well as in modern creolized languages, which exploit a few all-purpose prepositions, the meanings of which are evident by context. Our findings highlight the nature of English as always changing, as it assimilates features from each new generation of speakers. We discuss the data's implications for developmental education teachers, who are increasingly confronted with non-standard prepositional use.

English prepositions have been called “a trap for the unwary, and something of a nightmare for the foreign learner” (as cited in Mwangi, 2004, p. 27). What are prepositions? This category of function word conveys information about space, time, and direction, as well as metaphorical implications. So an object can be *on the table*, an event can be *on Wednesday*, a box can go *onto a shelf*, and a detective can be *on the case*.

In our reading of student essays at Marymount Manhattan College, we have noticed unusual pairings of verbs and preposi-

tions, such as *think to*, *based off of* and *have concerns on*. Surprisingly, these constructions are occurring in the writing of native American English speaking students of traditional age. As 65% of our student population comes from states other than New York, the changes occurring in prepositional phrases are not a reflection of a regional dialect.

Linguistic competence, our unconscious knowledge about the structure of our language, dictates what sounds well formed to us. Language users choose certain prepositions for certain constructions. In addition, our linguistic competence is dialect specific, so not all forms of English are the same. Hence, some speakers are comfortable with *different than* and others use *different from*. In other words, there is already general awareness of variation in preposition use.

Data from linguistic studies show changes in the prepositional system over time and region. The main message of these studies is that prepositions are indeed complex, variable, and have been subject to change, as is most of language. We believe our prepositional system is still changing.

RESEARCH FROM ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Much research has looked at English Language Learners (ELL) tackling that trap and nightmare quoted above. Lindstromberg (2001) surveyed ELL dictionaries and found that they covered the literal meanings (space, location, direction) of prepositions but neglected the metaphorical meanings. Prepositions used metaphorically, as in *beyond comprehension* and *behind a candidate*, were poorly represented in the most popular ELL dictionaries Lindstromberg surveyed.

Ferris (1999) labeled errors with prepositions “untreatable” because the system is so idiosyncratic, similar to idioms, and dependent on a certain amount of knowledge about the language. Examining various types of corrective feedback to intermediate ELL students, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) focused on the three most common errors of their subject pool, preposi-

tional errors being the most common type: 29% of all errors were omission or misuse of a preposition. Bitchener et al. found that while teacher feedback was associated with immediate improvement in the other error types, e.g., past tense markers and direct article use, prepositional errors were more resistant. Further, improvements were not evident until at least eight weeks into the study. Their results support Ferris' view of prepositional errors as "untreatable."

Inagaki (2002) found that Japanese speakers learning English reduce both location and directional prepositions to location uses. In comprehension tests, the subjects consistently processed a directional use of a motion verb plus preposition as a location meaning, e.g., *John swam under the bridge* was processed as a location statement rather than a goal, a direction to which John is headed. These data are in contrast to native English speakers, who recognize both meanings of the preposition.

Exploring Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) lessons in the use of English prepositions, Lo, Wang, and Yeh (2004) found improvement in ELL students' use of prepositions when the lessons required students to assign a confidence rating to their choice of preposition. The active and interactive nature of the lessons was cited as helpful to learning here.

Mwangi (2004) compared British English to the form of English spoken in Kenya by most of the population as a second language: Kenyan English. This research found a simplification of the prepositional system and a generalization of prepositional uses. The distinction between *on* and *onto* is one of location vs. direction. In Kenyan English, location is used for both, with *on* being used in both cases: *the box is on the table*, but also *light falls on the water*; *put the sling on your arm*. The distinction between *in* and *into* (again, location vs. direction) is simplified to the locative *in*: *coming in the country*; *fall in the trap*. This simplification echoes the findings of Inagaki.

British English use of *at* and *on* is generalized to *in* by Kenyan English: *in the party*, *in the island*. Some prepositions are rare or

have disappeared altogether in Kenyan English: *off*, *down*, *underneath*, *beneath*, and *past*. *Down*, for example, is used in the literal sense but not metaphorically as in *down the road*. *Beneath* and *underneath* are both replaced with *under*. *Past* is used in the temporal sense but not spatially.

Mwangi posited a leveling out of the semantic distinctions in Kenyan English. The prepositions have an expanded functional load and are doing double-duty. There are fewer synonyms, more generalization and simplification, but apparently no loss of communicative effectiveness. This last point is crucial, for language change is often met with prescriptive resistance. However, if communication is not impaired, there is little argument against change. Indeed, English today is communicatively effective with its lack of noun declensions and irregular plurals and tense markers.

Romaine (2000) studied the language Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin is, simultaneously, a lingua franca, pidgin, creole, first and second language for many speakers. A creolized English language, it demonstrates the trait of creole languages in general, by making use of a leaner, more all-purpose category of few prepositions, compared to the superstrate language (the language that contributed most of the vocabulary). Tok Pisin has two main prepositions that are used for multiple meanings: *long* and *bilong*. So we have *Mi go long taun* (*I went to town*) as well as *Haus bilong papa bilong mi* (*The house of the father of me*). Creole languages are often cited by linguists as representing the universal structure of human language. Despite location and influences, many creoles “make do” with a small number of prepositions. The argument could be made that creoles reflect the origins of language, with an accelerated rate of development, weeding out changes associated with generations of speakers.

OLD ENGLISH

In our review of the literature on English prepositions, we wanted to look historically at the English prepositional system. Kitson (1993) documented that Old English allowed for variation in what

case a preposition required in the prepositional phrase; the cases depended on whether the meaning of the preposition was spatial, temporal, or metaphorical. (There were also regional dialectal differences found.) The preposition *with*, for example, could take a genitive, dative, or accusative noun to follow, depending on the phrase's meaning. Today, except for the genitive as in *to Mary's* and *a friend of mine*, English prepositions take an object noun phrase. Old English, then, shows a richer, more complex prepositional system, in contrast to the simplified modern system.

NON-STANDARD USAGES OF PREPOSITIONS

Dialect differences in prepositions in contemporary English have already been documented. English dialects vary from the standard dialect form at all linguistic levels. Style guides prefer *different from* over *different than* (e.g., Strunk, White, and Kalman, 2005); usage, however, varies. Crystal (2004) documents some non-standard prepositional uses in a northeast region of England: *going up my mate's house* and *got off of the bus* (p. 482). Additional variants commonly heard include *based on/based off of* and *wait in line/wait on line*.

OUR STUDY

We have both worked for many years teaching undergraduates and working with essay writing. It has just been in the last few years, however, that we have encountered prepositional uses that surprise us. Reading papers by native English speaking students, we were again and again puzzled by what we, also native speakers, considered misuse of prepositions. Our examples are from writing assignments completed by native American English-speaking, traditional aged students at Marymount Manhattan College.

Of the 88 examples of non-standard prepositional use recorded, 73% involve misuse of only seven prepositions: *to*, *in*, *on*, *with*, *about*, *of*, and *for*. Most errors are in utterances where the preposition carries a metaphorical meaning. We label these prepositions as demonstrating low-semantic loads. Therefore, where a preposition

is used to indicate a concrete location (*in the store*), directional use (*to the store*), or temporal use (*at 7p.m.*), we find few errors. Only in one case was the ill-formed preposition used to indicate direction ?*I arrived to school*.¹

Table 1 gives a breakdown of errors for the most frequently occurring individual prepositions in our examples. The “greater than” symbol indicates the direction of substitution. For example, the preposition *to* shifted to another preposition 15 times or 17% of the total 88 sentences collected. *To* was itself the replacement for different prepositions 13 times or 15% of the total examples.

TABLE I:

Data on prepositional shifts

Preposition	Preposition > X*		X* > Preposition	
	Examples	Percentage	Examples	Percentage
TO	15	17%	13	15%
IN	14	16%	7	8%
ON	4	5%	17	19%
WITH	8	9%	5	6%
ABOUT	11	13%	0	0%
OF	11	13%	10	11%
FOR	2	2%	9	10%

* *X* represents any other preposition.

Some patterns emerged. Most striking are the data on the preposition *about*, which carries a fairly consistent primary meaning (e.g. concerning, relating to, in reference to) as in these examples: *to talk about*, *the report is about*, *a book about*. The target preposition *about* has been replaced with substitutes, namely *of*, *on*, *with*, and *to*, in all our examples. No errors involved a substitution to *about*.

Examples:

1. ?My mother received a phone call on my behavior.

¹ The question mark indicates structures judged ill formed by native speakers. For this project the authors used their judgments of English to determine an utterance ill or well formed.

2. ?This made me think more to my everyday classroom experience.

3. ?They had concerns on raising their children bilingual.

The substitution of *about* by *on*, in the last sentence above, may be attributed to semantic similarity. The shared concept of “pertaining to, concerning” is illustrated by the pairs below. The use of either preposition creates a well-formed phrase, and the pairs evince little semantic distinctiveness. In other words, either preposition works:

1. There’s a report on TV about the Iraqi War.

There’s a report on TV on the Iraqi War.

2. Do you have any books on homelessness?

Do you have any books about homelessness?

Another impetus for students’ preference could be the slightly more formal style of *on*. Students might judge the phrase *an article on prepositions* to be more scholarly than *an article about prepositions*.

The data on *in* also reveal a significant trend. There are twice as many examples of *in* being replaced (16%) than of *in* replacing another preposition (8%). Conversely, the data indicate that the use of *on* as a replacement preposition is increasing: in 19% of the samples, other prepositions were omitted in favor of *on*. Not surprisingly, *in* is often replaced by the semantically and phonetically similar *on* as seen in these student examples:

1. ?the latest trends on technology

2. ?to further indulge on

For also seems to be spreading, being replaced in only 2% of the samples but supplanting other prepositions (*to*, *in*, *of*, and *with*) in 10% of the samples, as seen below.

1. ?look forward for

2. ?participate for

3. ?purpose for

4. ?sympathize for

Like target *to*, *for* gives a goal, but more often in the sense of “why,” as seen in its conjunctive use: Speak now, *for* there is no time to lose. Other examples of *for* with this meaning include *a reason for*, *wait for*, *fight for*, and *search for*.

In other cases, the substitutions do not indicate an increase or decrease in use. *Of* is replaced by other prepositions (*on, for, from, for, with, to, at, in*) in 13% of the samples and used in place of another preposition (*to, about, for, in, on, of, with*) in 11% of the sentences. With targets *for* and *to*, exchanges exist in both directions: students use *for* where we would use *to* and vice versa. The lack of a pattern indicates confusion among English speakers, a sign that the system is in flux.

Many changes in usage appear to be based on analogy. For example, a student who writes *purpose for* might be using this structure with the analogous *reason for* in mind. Table 2 contains students' prepositional errors and the possible analogies that prompted them.

TABLE 2:
Analogies underlying prepositional shifts

Preposition & Possible Analogy	Example
OF > FOR reason for	Cones and rods in the retina have the sole purpose for deciphering color.
FOR > OF convinced of	His first conviction was of having pornographic pictures of minors.
TO > OF warn them of	That alerted them of incoming stock quotes
OF > TO objection to	He couldn't live down her rejection to him.
WITH > OF tired of	They were bored of reading
TO > WITH unconcerned with	We become indifferent with society
WITH > TO familiar to us	We are familiar to the term
TO > FROM expected from	It's due from simple error
FROM > TO put a stop to	Stop the language to adopting new words

At this stage, we are able to draw a few tentative conclusions:

- The system of prepositions in American English is in flux, and the most frequently used prepositions are the most affected.
- Some simplification exists, such as the loss of directional variants *into* and *onto*, as well as the reduced use of *about* and *in*.
- In metaphoric uses, the prepositional substitutions are heavily influenced by analogy of semantically similar constructions: *purpose of / reason for; bored with / tired of*.

APPLICATION TO TEACHING

English prepositions have long tortured ELL students and teachers alike. The traditional approach focuses on illustrations of basic spatial use, then memorization of metaphoric use. Students are encouraged to create lexical entries including the preposition, e.g., *interested in, bored with* or to memorize sentences, *I am interested in boxing*.

Researchers, on the other hand, have advocated teaching students a primary spatial meaning to which they can relate more abstract meanings. Lindstromberg (1996) illustrates this approach with the preposition *on*, which he suggests has the primary meaning of “contact of an object with a line or surface” (p. 229). He advises students to view the metaphoric use, the *engine died on us*, as indicating contact of an event (*engine died*) with a person (*on us*).

Such advice is aimed at teachers who work with ELL students. What of those teachers involved in developmental education for native English speaking students? How do we “correct” forms that are in line with a native speaker’s linguistic competence?

While we have yet to discover a simple solution, we would like to suggest some strategies for all teachers and other professionals for the near future:

- *Distinguish between language change and bad grammar*: Instructors should explain the concept of language change and the prepositional shift currently in progress. Thus, students would become more aware of the nature of language

and not view their choice of preposition as yet another grammar mistake.

- *Making students aware:* Instructors should call attention to prepositional use in readings and student writing, encouraging students to make their own list of preposition-verb pairs. Prepositions are often ignored as “small words” of little importance; however, as students begin to focus attention on pairs of verb and preposition, they will be better equipped to recognize their own errors. When students learn new vocabulary, they need to be encouraged to include a sentence using the new lexical item in their notebooks or on flashcards.
- *Track language change among new generations:* Instructors should understand the possible discrepancy between their students’ sense of the prepositional system, both native and non-native speakers, and their own understanding of English. Instructors should also note consistencies in students’ use of prepositions to keep abreast of accepted doubles. For instance, *based off of* is currently widely accepted, whereas *afraid from* is not. By collecting examples, instructors will gain sufficient knowledge of trends in preposition use.
- *Use supplemental tools:* Until reference grammars contain an expanded section on prepositions, including verb and preposition pairs as well as commonly misused prepositions, teachers should supplement their materials with such information, culled from student papers. An excellent source of standard usage is *Perfect Prepositions* by Galina Kimber.

CONCLUSION

Our research so far validates Connell’s (as cited in Mwangi, 2004) belief that the English prepositional system is complex and difficult to master. Contemporary dialect differences have been documented, and writing pedagogy aims to eradicate any variation. Our own observations confirm a contemporary prepositional system in flux. English has already lost various grammatical distinctions: we no longer decline nouns to distinguish case or gender; we have a

relatively simple verb conjugation system; the subjunctive mood is rarely used; and case markings on pronouns are notoriously in flux, the *who/whom* distinction being lost and the differences between *I* and *me* being simplified to *myself*.

It would not be surprising, then, that distinctions among prepositions are being neutralized, especially where they carry a low semantic load. At the moment, two generations – we, the teachers, and our students – are at different stages in our linguistic competence about prepositions. Future research should focus on the exact changes occurring, in terms of spatial, locative, directional, and metaphorical use of prepositions. Researchers should look at prepositions not just from a syntactic viewpoint, but also in terms of the semantic relations that the prepositional phrase conveys. So while *to the doctor* contains a noun phrase that is syntactically object case, the semantic function of the noun is one of goal. We also should examine any differences between spoken and written use of prepositions.

As academics trained in the descriptive, anti-prescriptive discipline of linguistics, we are in a position to note these changes without inferring lack of English skills on the part of our students. Furthermore, we consider dialect differences that diverge from Standard American English a natural part of a language's organic nature. We raise the issue of the current state of prepositions as evidence that language constantly changes, and that good teachers are attuned to the linguistic competence of their students.

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What Were They Thinking? Decision-Making in the Experiences of College Students At Risk

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The ability to make appropriate decisions is a key to college success. Some college students appear to not make satisfactory academic progress, not because they lack ability or desire, but because they make academic decisions that seem to put them at risk. Assisting students to make appropriate academic decisions is a primary objective for developmental education professionals. This article proposes an ecological framework for investigating decision-making in the experiences of college students at risk. By helping students at risk to better understand the dynamic forces that shape their senses of identity and that affect their decision-making experiences, we can better assist them to make decisions appropriate to achieve their academic and personal goals.

College students are faced with having to make a number of important decisions, and the ability to make appropriate decisions is a key to college success. Some college students appear not to make satisfactory academic progress, not because they lack ability or desire, but because they make academic decisions that seem to put them at risk. Examples are plentiful. One is the student with an ACT math score of 16 who struggles with remedial math courses yet insists on majoring in engineering to get a high paying job. Another example is the developmental student who must juggle full-time home and job responsibilities and enrolls in a semester schedule overloaded with “killer” courses in order to graduate on

time. Students in these cases often face academic difficulties, probation and academic suspension. Assisting students to make appropriate academic decisions is a primary objective for developmental education professionals. This article proposes an ecological framework for investigating decision-making in the experiences of college students at risk. By helping students to understand better the dynamic forces that affect their academic decisions, we can better assist them to achieve their academic and personal goals.

To help students make sense of decisions that place them at academic risk, the temptation to prescribe our own meaning to the student's experiences must be resisted. It is easy to assume that a student's decisions are inappropriate because they produce negative outcomes, but that does not address the crucial issue. Rather than conclude, "That is the most ridiculous decision imaginable!" we need to ask, "What was he or she thinking?" The crucial issue is what the decision means to the student. This question poses a twofold challenge. Students may not always know what drives their decision-making processes, and we cannot presume to know what decisions mean to the students. To empower students at risk to make decisions appropriate for them, we must step beyond analyzing the decisions made or the outcomes and help students investigate what their decisions mean to them.

Schutz (1967) states that this type of investigation is three-sided. One aspect is to examine how college students at risk interpret their experiences of making academic decisions, such as whether to attend college, to major in a certain field, or to take certain courses. Instead of just identifying what decisions students make, what is being asked is for the student to interpret his or her subjective or intended meanings for the decisions. The investigation also probes the student's process of meaning-establishment and asks how the student creates his or her meaning for the decision. Schutz states that the question of meaning can only be adequately addressed from within the context of historical time. The student approaches the process of making academic decisions with a stock of knowledge gained through past experiences, interactions, and a set of

future expectations. To understand what academic decisions mean to students at risk, the formation and structure of those lived experiences and future intentions that give meaning to their decisions must be examined. Schutz also notes that the student's social world is always in the process of formation; therefore, presuppositions through which students interpret their experiences are continuously being created. The third aspect of this investigation involves the observer's process of interpretation. Schutz reminds us that we can observe students at risk, and we can relate their academic decisions to some of our prior experiences. We may share similar experiences, but we cannot presume to share the same meanings of the experiences. The meaning belongs to the actor, not the observer.

For students at risk to understand better the academic decisions they make, they need to identify who or what is the most significant influence on their thinking. Students do not make academic decisions in a vacuum. Instead, their experiences of decision-making are shaped by complex, interrelated interactions involving other persons, environments, resources, goals and past experiences. Therefore, the quest to understand better the decision-making process of students at risk should incorporate concepts gleaned from views of human development and the person-environment interactions that influence decision-making.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE CONTEXTS

Ecology theory proposes that all aspects of human development are interconnected, much like the threads of a spider's web; therefore, the focus should be on understanding the whole context rather than attempting to isolate the various aspects. Bronfenbrenner (1989) argues that the developing individual is embedded in a series of progressively more complex and interactive systems. What happens in one setting influences the others. For example, family problems at home can impact a student's academic performance at school, and changes in federal and state policies may greatly impact the opportunity for some students to pursue college degrees.

Environmental influences may include such forces as family, friends and peers, previous school experiences, and even the media. As the generations of college students have changed—from Boomers to Gen-Xers to Millennials – the range of parental influence has shifted. Bandura (1986) emphasized that external forces, such as parental modeling, parental push, or parental encouragement, influence behaviors. Early literature supported the idea that parents exercise the most influence on a student's decisions about college and that first-generation college students from low socio-economic backgrounds might be disadvantaged by not having positive parental modeling (Brittain, 1963; Smith, 1981; Stage & Rushin, 1993; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). However, ten years later Pearson and Dellmann-Jenkins (1997) note that parents were no longer the most significant influence in a student's decisions about college. Today, educational administrators at all grade levels express concern about a modern breed of micromanaging parents – helicopter parents – and the impact they have on students' decision-making and personal development (Strauss, 2006).

The environmental influence on a student's development may extend beyond the immediate family or primary care-giver. Astin (1993) argues that the single most powerful influence on personal development is the peer group. He suggests that students will change their values, behavior, and academic plans based on dominant orientations associated within the peer group. Sokatch (2006) finds that peers are the single best predictor in college-going decisions in his sample of low-income urban minority public high school graduates. A student's educational background is also a possible influence on his or her process of making academic decisions. Wahl and Blackhurst (2000) note that important academic decisions may be made before adolescence. In fact, tentative college plans may be formed in early elementary school (Ring, 1994). The impact of the power of suggestion transmitted through popular television and movies on some students' selections of college majors and impressions of what college would be should also be investigated. Are students' interests in career fields such as criminal in-

investigation and medicine influenced by popular TV shows such as “CSI” and “Grey’s Anatomy”? If so, do students have realistic understandings of the profession or required academic preparations?

The econometric model suggests that students are strongly influenced by their perceptions of the economic benefit promised for their efforts (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). A study by the Educational Testing Service (2000) notes that college campuses will become increasingly diverse in the 21st century and that minority students will account for eighty percent of that growth. The report attributes this projected growth to a belief among many minority families that a college degree is the key to having a prosperous life.

By investigating the environmental influence contexts, we can help students see how they are affected by outside influences, such as family, friends, prior educational experiences, and media. This will assist students to assess whether they have created their own meanings in decision-making or simply adopted meanings handed down by others. The other dimension that contributes to the decision-making process is the interaction of the student’s identity development contexts through which a sense of self is created.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT CONTEXTS

The investigation into helping students at risk make sense of their decision-making processes should also seek to identify the contexts that contribute most to their development of a sense of self. Self concept can be understood as “our attempt to explain ourselves to ourselves, to build a scheme that organizes our impressions, feelings, and attitudes about ourselves” (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 71). Human development theory notes that a person’s sense of self is constantly being redefined through complex processes of interactions involving biological, life stages, psychosocial, socio-cultural, socio-historical, and racial/ethnic identity experiences.

Psychosocial theory contributes to an understanding of college students’ experiences by examining the important issues that students face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives

(Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Even though his theory has been contested, Erikson is established as the progenitor of developmental theories. Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980) assert that the greatest identity development occurs during late adolescence – between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. According to this theory, most college students are faced with making complex academic and career decisions during a critical developmental stage when they are just beginning to formalize their senses of self. College students are in the process of becoming. Students at risk need to understand how their decision-making is intimately linked to their developing sense of self and the interactions that influence this process.

Chickering (1969) was one of the first researchers to specifically examine the development of college students. He notes that the transition to college is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social, and academic adjustment. He concludes that most college students develop their senses of identity concurrent with their educational attainments. Archer (1982) adds that the development of a sense of self is a process that may linger and progress through the first years of college. A study by Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994) documents that students grow and change over time as a result of co-curricular involvement. Based upon such theories, students at risk should understand how their academic decisions are vitally linked to their identity development.

Authors such as Fleming (1981), Ogbu (1991), and Tinto (1993) have documented the impact of racial and ethnic identity on a student's decision-making and college experiences. Fleming (1981) notes that due to issues of racial prejudice, black separatism, and a preoccupation with social problems, black students on predominantly white campuses may spend more of their energies learning interpersonal coping strategies than in pursuits conducive to intellectual growth. Ogbu (1991) theorizes that some minority groups in America may see education as oppressive and that ethnic groups form different theories of making it – their cultural histories lead them to varying formulas for success, some valuing education

more than others. Tinto (1993) adds that students of color at predominantly white institutions often feel they are in a foreign land and may feel isolated, question their academic abilities, experience feelings of inferiority, and question their self-worth. These experiences may result in ambivalent attitudes about education and the belief that the system of oppression in which they live would not allow them to attain the benefits of education even if they did exert themselves. These students may come to the conclusion that if the education path is blocked, then there is no need to follow it. This view can be promulgated as parents pass it along to their children.

The contexts that shape a student's sense of identity and process of meaning-making are complex and include biological, family, social, cultural, historical, economic, and intellectual factors that are influenced by issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. The student's meanings of academic decisions are constructed through dynamic processes in which the individual and the environment continuously interact. The individual both affects and is affected by his or her environment and participates in changing the environment. So, behaviors, such as a student making academic decisions, cannot be interpreted out of context and should be understood in terms of the total setting or context in which behavior is produced.

USEFULNESS OF THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

More research is needed to identify the forces that influence the decision-making processes of today's students at risk. The primary advantage of investigating the experiences of college students at risk making academic decisions within an ecological and systems approach is that it acknowledges that students do not make decisions in a vacuum. This framework allows us to observe the greater context within which meaning is established and interpreted. By helping students at risk to better understand the dynamic forces that shape their senses of identity and that affect their decision-making experiences, we can better assist them to make decisions appropriate to achieve their academic and personal goals. The end result will not be just higher retention rates, but more fulfilled lives.

Rather than prescribe our own meanings to the decisions made by students, we do need to ask, "What were they thinking?"

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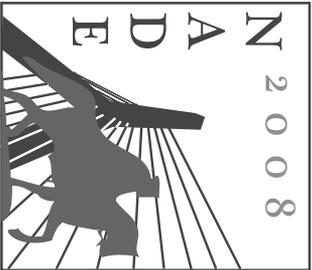
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