

## **LOOKING FORWARD...GETTING PREPARED FOR COLLEGE-LEVEL LITERACY TASKS: CLASSROOM TEACHER PROJECT GRANT REFLECTIONS**

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Education is a dynamic, ever-changing enterprise. As evidence, one need only look to how teaching and learning in Montana are now aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that were developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. First released to the public in March 2010, this standards-based reform was designed as the “culmination of an extended, broad-based effort to fulfill the charge issued by the states to create the next generation of K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3.) Despite the back and forth between supporters and skeptics, the CCSS *did* provide an incentive to renew conversations about the academic expectations for college students. On university campuses across the country, the ubiquity of discussions about the disconnect between college instructors’ expectations and students’ readiness to perform is telling. Recent research documents the low level of preparation that first-year college students bring for the cognitive and rhetorical demands in higher education (Conley, 2007). When it comes to basic standards for college-level writing, less than one-third of incoming freshman are adequately prepared for college. This statistic suggests significant consequences for students and post-secondary institutions regarding ultimate student success. Conley’s (2007) definition of high school readiness for college stresses the ability of future and current students to “...enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution” ( p. 5). On the topic of writing readiness at the college-prep, high-school level, experts frequently emphasize writing skills that include facility with grammar,

sentence structure, and other conventions (Conley, 2003; Enders, 2001; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006). In addition, students entering universities should exhibit clarity of purpose, understanding of audience, facility with rhetoric, care with organization, provision of adequate support, and ability to edit their work (Conley, 2003; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006). Authentic voice, ability to write persuasively, clarity, succinctness, transitioning, and variety (Enders, 2001) also appear as threads throughout research literature on writing skill proficiencies important for learning university-quality writing.

The 2011 NAEP assessment was administered using technology which offered a unique glimpse into how students utilize computers in the process of writing (National Center on Education Statistics, 2012) The NAEP 2011 report defined “basic” as “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 7). The report defined “proficient” as solid academic performance” and stated “[s]tudents reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 7). In grades 8 and 12, only 24% of students were proficient in writing and 3% were advanced (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 1). Nearly 75% of students at these grade levels are at either basic or below writing abilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 1).

Such reports suggest that secondary preparation has been less-than-adequate (Acker & Halasek, 2008; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006.) Although there are many explanations for this perplexing reality, the fact remains. Many college students are underprepared for the literacy tasks that are part of the post-secondary learning experience. First-year seminars have been designed as a way to bridge that disconnect.

Structured around the academic triad of reading, discussing, and writing, first-year seminars are popular at private and public institutions across the nation. While seminars may differ in structure, their shared goal is to help students become active participants in the literacy journey as issues of identity, global citizenship and other themes are explored through reading, discussion, and writing.

In my interviews with secondary and post-secondary students, I've found that many simply do not read. Kelly Gallagher's (2008) *Readicide* provides further testimony to this disturbing reality; a nation of non-readers exists due to cultural and school-based factors. When students are not readers, they approach reading with the discomfiture of a non-swimmer in an Olympic pool. They are awkward, uncomfortable, and hesitant. If text contains complex ideas or unfamiliar vocabulary, non-seasoned readers are apt to plow through to just "get done" rather than being purposeful, monitoring what they do and do not understand, and employing fix-up strategies.

My experiences teaching a dual-enrollment class as well as working with first-year students at one of the flagship universities in Montana confirm this reality. There exists a very real need to help students read critically. Because many simply do not read the assigned texts (or read with a half-hearted effort), their participation is compromised and, consequently, potential success is thwarted.

### **Learning from Barbara**

In February, I attended the 2015 First-Year Experience conference in Orlando and networked with a colleague whose experiences mirrored my own. Barbara has been teaching first-year seminars at a metropolitan campus in central Florida for nine years. She explained how modifying the existing course and adding a focus on teaching study skills and habits made a

difference. She set learning targets that helped students to establish intentionality in their approaches to reading (i.e., read with a purpose, employ comprehension monitoring behaviors, integrate text information while reading, etc.) Barbara employed several techniques, which she reported were popular with her students.

One technique required students to rank their reading assignments from most challenging to easiest. Then students would complete the most difficult task when they had fewest distractions and were most alert. For most, this was in the morning. At other times of the day, students would then attend to assignments that were not as taxing. They would cross out each assignment on their Reading List, thus providing a sense of completion and closure. Barbara reported that by ordering homework reading tasks in this way, students felt empowered. For some, this approach altered a pattern of procrastination—saving the “hard tasks” to the very end of the day when fatigue is present and generating quality is likely to be severely compromised.

A second technique that Barbara shared was her success with reading logs. Students were required to keep reading reflection journals. Being responsible for a (minimum) 200-word entry to accompany each reading assignment had the effect of reminding students that reading should be linked to a purpose. She helped them frame their reading task with this question: *Why am I reading this and what can I expect to learn?*

### **Learning from Tim**

Writing has been called the neglected-R for good reason. While students do plenty of writing, quality is not necessarily a by-product of cranking out assignments year after year. My faculty colleagues note the rocky road that some students travel as they transition from high school. Students, they say, feel overwhelmed when confronted with papers, lab reports, research

projects, etc.—all with distinct expectations. Yet the National Commission on Writing asserts that writing should be viewed as a “satisfying, even joyful” experience (2003, p, 13.)

Accordingly, at the Association for Literacy Educators and Researchers annual meeting in Costa Mesa, California, I searched for workshops that addressed writing improvement. There I met Tim. A veteran instructor with twenty-five years of college teaching experience, Tim shared how he assists students to become more adept at writing in his introductory college classes. In their semester-long journey, attitudes are changed: Writing is no longer an unpleasant chore, but a worthwhile endeavor.

A former high school ELA practitioner, Tim now teaches at a small liberal arts college in the mid-west. In his presentation, he shared how small successes engage and motivate learners, who are then inspired to persevere, rather than quit. In his research with adolescent writers, he has chronicled his conversations with their teachers and observations in their classrooms. Upon completion of his multi-year project, he concluded that high school writing is generally assigned, *not* taught. Spending time in several high schools, he observed that students generally pass from one class to the next without instruction. Teachers assign and assess. And the process repeats. Seldom is there targeted instruction on *how* to improve or mediate the process. Tim shared a commonly-held assumption culled from his interviews with secondary practitioners: Writing is a skill teachers expect students to have by the time they enter high school. In his findings, however, only about five percent of students knew how to manipulate sentences—to form and reform them according to the demands of various academic writing tasks.

Furthermore, when Tim interviewed his college students, most admitted to writing only one draft—and usually the night before or even the morning when it was due. Having assessed the situation, Tim set out to conquer these roadblocks. His first requirement was that students

turn in three drafts for each major paper; furthermore, each subsequent draft needed to show mark-ups and significant changes. Tim also set aside time each week for direct instruction in revision approaches. Switch in verb tense throughout a paper was one typical error. To counter this, Tim reminded students to read the draft out loud numerous times. The first reading might be to assess flow and development of ideas. The second read aloud might be to listen for verbs. Are they all in the past (or present) tense? Then Tim's class actually practiced this very skill, using an anonymous paper from another section. Thus, his students had a chance to work through the actual writing tip. Tim was convinced that practicing the strategy and displaying it on his class *Remember To Do This* list was critical in transforming behavior. While some techniques or helpful hints were simple, it was the weekly reminders and repetition that helped students embrace these as habits of the mind.

In another mini-lesson, Tim reminded students of the importance of evidence. Many had the habit of simply dropping statements randomly into an essay, but failing to develop the idea with supporting evidence. While Tim realized this was a skill that should have been learned in middle school and most certainly in high school, he knew it was necessary to re-address it. He pondered how he could scaffold this assignment so as to make the experience meaningful. To provide a memorable claim and support exercise, he wondered what would interest his students. Food. The next day as a class, they brainstormed a list of "best places to eat" and after each one, indicated a reason why. *The best restaurant in town is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.* For Pita Pit, students offered that it provided tasty fast-food. For Five Guys Burgers and Fries, students argued that their fare of hamburgers, hot dogs, and fries was the All-American comfort food, though not low-calorie. As a result of this exercise, students brainstormed various rationales for their favorite food establishment, including quality, cost, location, service, availability for

delivery or take-out, cleanliness, etc. Then students were tasked with nominating their favorite restaurant and writing a paragraph incorporating the facts, or evidence. Since the exercise proved to be highly motivating, Tim was able to harness their energy and extend the exercise, applying the claim/support process to a class reading.

### **Final thoughts**

Opportunities to learn from others is what keeps the education profession vibrant. I am grateful to the Montana State Reading Council for selecting me as the 2015 Classroom Teacher Grant recipient. This grant supported my attendance at two professional meetings: The First-Year Experience Conference and the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers Conference. Thank you, MSRC!

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