Teaching Underprepared College Readers: Where Have We Been?
Where Are We Going?

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In this article, at the turn of the new millennium, we explore some of the questions that face those who work in college developmental reading settings, looking at where we have been and where we are going. We will describe college developmental reading programs with attention to the history of the programs, recent changes and current trends, and issues and challenges for the future.

**Where we have been?**

Institutions of higher learning have been accepting students who did not meet their academic standards for almost 200 years (Casazza, 1999). Over the past century, many college reading teachers have also struggled with ways to meet the needs of these underprepared college students. Although "how to study" and reading remediation courses were available at many colleges and universities during the first half of the last century, most formal college developmental reading programs emerged during the 1970s and 1980s (Bullock, Madden, & Mallery, 1990).

During the past decade, there has been an increase in college developmental reading programs; these programs were present at 47% of colleges and universities in the late 1980s and at 57% of colleges and universities in the late 1990s (Laine, Laine, & Bullock, 1999). Some of this increase is due to decreased enrollments in institutions of higher learning. Historically, as colleges and universities experienced declines in student enrollment, they recruited increasing numbers of underprepared students. They needed to admit developmental students to survive financially
(Landberg, 1993). Approximately 30% of all students entering college have some type of academic deficiency (NCES, 1996). The educational challenge is to provide a meaningful curriculum for these underprepared post-secondary students.

**Do college developmental reading courses make a difference?**

College developmental reading courses do make a difference. With appropriate assistance, underprepared college students succeed. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1996) less than 30% of all those who score in the bottom half of the distribution on achievement tests when they enter college eventually obtain a baccalaureate degree. However, according to the data from the National Study of Developmental Education (Boylan & Bonham, 1992), of those students scoring in the bottom half of this distribution and participating in developmental education, approximately 40% earn degrees. That is very close to the national average of 45.6% for all students entering universities (NCES, 1996). Spruiell's (1995) ten-year study also documented the positive effects of college developmental reading courses on the academic success of underprepared college students. In addition to academic success, college developmental reading courses can have a positive impact on self-esteem (Gillespie, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984).

**What is our theoretical frame?**

College developmental reading programs are increasingly moving away from a remedial/developmental paradigm and toward a learner-centered constructivist frame. Constructivist theory is not new. It is derived from the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, among others. The term constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves---each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning---as he or she learns. For the college developmental reading teacher who holds a constructivist perspective, learning is
making meaning. The consequences of this constructivist view are twofold. College developmental reading teachers (1) must focus on the reader (not on the texts or the lessons being taught), and (2) must realize that all knowledge is rooted in the meaning that the reader, or the community of readers, constructs.

Although there is an array of constructivist perspectives, there is agreement on a large number of issues, for example, on the role of the teacher and learner. It is perhaps best described in von Glasersfeld's (1995) constructivist conception of learning. He argues that teachers play the role of a midwife in the birth of understanding as opposed to a mechanic in the transfer of knowledge. The role of the college developmental reading teacher in the 21st century is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with opportunities and incentives to build it up (von Glasersfeld, 1996). Mayer (1996) describes constructivist teachers as guides, learners, and sense makers. In Gergen's (1995) view, constructivist teachers are coordinators, facilitators, resource advisors, tutors, and coaches.

**What is the focus of our work?**

Given this theoretical frame, what is the focus of our work? Traditionally, many college developmental programs divided knowledge into discrete disciplines. The composition faculty were distinct from the reading faculty. Mathematics and the humanities were unrelated. That is beginning to change. Laine, Laine, and Bullock (1999) found that many college developmental reading teachers now engage in cross-curricular work and multi-disciplinary efforts. Indeed, although 40% of the programs still maintain a developmental reading focus, 23% report a broader focus, including general study skills courses, paired reading and content courses, and integrated reading and writing courses.
The knowledge explosion witnessed in the last half of this century will certainly pale in comparison to the expansion of knowledge in the next century. Simply helping students read academic texts, the traditional focus of college developmental reading teachers, would be a very narrow focus in the 21st century. We can be certain that higher levels of literacy, sometimes called "high literacy" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), will be required of our students. Langer (1997) refers to this higher level of literacy as "learning mindfully." She contrasts mindful learning with top-down learning (lectures) and with bottom-up learning (learning from direct experience). She describes mindful learning as "sideways learning," learning "with an openness to novelty and actively noticing differences, contexts and perspectives" (p.23).

To help our underprepared college students cope with this knowledge explosion and the demands of the Information Age, we must refine our focus. This higher literacy includes oral and visual literary, as well as reading and writing. Monitoring one's own thinking, grasping diverse ideas and beliefs, examining multiple perspectives, working in collaboration with diverse individuals, and sharing knowledge to solve problems are just some of the elements of this higher literacy. This "mindful learning," or high literacy, must be the focus of college developmental reading teachers as we enter the new millennium.

**Who are our students?**

College developmental reading programs serve traditional and non-traditional students who are underprepared for college level courses. Some have high school degrees and some have general education degrees (GED). Many two-year, open-access colleges accept students who have not passed state-mandated proficiency tests or received high school diplomas. Traditional undergraduate students are generally between the ages of 18 and 24. Students who are 25 or older are considered non-traditional.
The age distribution of students enrolled in college developmental reading courses remained fairly stable over the past decade (Laine, Laine, & Bullock, 1999). On average, 63% are 17 to 22. Twenty-one percent are between 23 and 30. Eleven percent are between 31 and 40. Only 5% of the students are over 40 years of age. It is interesting to note that the number of non-traditional students remained about the same over the past 10-year period.

**Who does the teaching?**

In the past, college developmental reading programs often hired faculty without training in the teaching of reading. The role of the "reading teacher" was to help underprepared students unlock content textbooks. The teacher was viewed as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom and the assumption was that any expert in the discipline could teach someone else to read that content.

However, as we enter the new millennium, college developmental faculty have increased training in reading and more academic training in general. Laine, Laine, and Bullock (1999) found that the majority of reading programs require candidates (both full and part-time positions) to hold a master's degree. Eighty-eight percent hold a master's degree and 2% hold a doctorate. Once they are hired, college developmental reading faculty participate in regular and periodic evaluations; 82% of the college developmental reading programs are required to submit annual evaluations of program faculty.

Support staff are also critical to the success of developmental reading programs. The staff most commonly used in these programs are tutors (used in 72% of the programs) and counselors (used in 48% of the programs). Three quarters of developmental reading programs provide tutoring and skills assistance as part of the course (Laine, Laine & Bullock, 1999). In some programs, professional and volunteer tutors work side-by-side with the course instructors. Ninety percent of the tutors currently working in college developmental reading programs have advanced degrees.
What are the roles played by teachers and students?

In the past, the responsibility for learning rested squarely on the shoulders of college developmental students. Now, consistent with a constructivist perspective, students and teachers are more likely to share that role. Underprepared college students learn by applying concepts and by engaging in the learning and thinking processes. College developmental settings, more than many others, are collaborative (Cullum, 1991). According to Carriuolo (1994), "developmental educators have long favored collaborative learning and know how to make it effective" (p. B2). Further support for collaborative learning comes from Kaiden (1998). She reports that students need collaborative peer groups to discuss texts and to improve their understanding of passages. Collaborative learning techniques are often a part of small group instruction in college developmental reading programs. Proponents of collaborative learning, such as Wells, Chang, and Maher (1990), view learning as a transaction among learners, knowledge, and experts.

The roles of the learners and the "experts" are interchangeable during collaborative learning. For example, students have opportunities to work with other members of the learning community, such as the instructor, tutors, or peers. In these activities, students collaborate with their peers to negotiate meaning. Cazden (1986) reports that classrooms can become, in this way, a setting for interactions among peers. As students collaborate with their peers, they actively make decisions about audience and purpose and become more independent, depending less on the teacher and more on themselves and their peers to help them understand.

What instructional formats are used?

In the past, many college developmental reading teachers delivered instruction through lectures. However, class sizes in college developmental reading programs are growing smaller, allowing opportunities for more innovative instructional strategies. Laine, Laine, & Bullock (1999) report
that a little more than half (52%) of the college developmental reading programs have
teacher/student ratios ranging from 1:11 to 1:20 and a much wider variety of presentation styles is
being used, including self-paced learning, collaborative learning, learning communities, instruction
adapted to varied leaning styles, service learning, distance learning, small group instruction, paired
or fused courses, freshman seminars, supplemental instruction, strategic learning, and critical
thinking. Reading and writing are taught together, in paired or integrated courses, more frequently
than they were a decade ago.

Research, such as found in Atwell's *In the Middle* (1987) and Bartholomae and Petrosky's
*Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* (1986), supports such changes in instructional format. Henry's
studies (1992, 1995, 1997) show that the workshop approach described by Atwell is being
employed effectively with underprepared college readers and writers in a wide range of settings.
Henry immerses her students in authentic reading experiences and urges other college reading
educators to encourage their colleagues to do the same: "Instead of caving in to pressure to teach
our students to 'read,' why not encourage our colleagues to make real reading the foundation of
their courses?" (p.140). Using a "workshop" format, students are given opportunities to engage in
real reading and writing. Underprepared college students in these classes select reading materials
from classroom mini-libraries or bring fiction and non-fiction from outside the classroom. The
conventions of grammar, writing mechanics, and summary writing are more frequently taught in
mini-lessons.

A study of 154 college developmental reading students, conducted by Morris (1995) over two
semesters, examined five teachers using a readers' workshop format and three teachers using
traditional instruction. Her results support the effectiveness of a reading workshop format with
students involved in sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, and writing to improve reading.
Reading workshop was at least as effective as traditional instruction in increasing levels of reading achievement and was more effective in generating positive attitudes toward reading.

Landberg (1993) explored yet another related format, the use of socio-psycholinguistic teaching strategies. Surveys, sent to 224 college developmental reading teachers and to 28 experts in the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and socio-psycholinguistics throughout the United States, revealed that both practitioners and experts agreed that socio-psycholinguistic teaching strategies were useful, particularly with developmental college students.

In the past, college developmental reading teachers designed courses based on what they knew how to teach. Now, what the students need to know to function in a complex world is the basis of new courses emerging in college developmental reading programs. The reality for college developmental educators is that academically underprepared students need to be served. Programs must be designed to help students develop the academic strategies needed to succeed in college. Curriculum designed to include meaningful reading and writing growth is necessary.

**What does the future hold for college developmental reading programs?**

Although it is a daunting task to predict the changing nature of college developmental reading programs in the 21st century, much less in the next millennium, in this final section, we will speculate about several developments that hold promise for the future: the push for mandatory assessment, the role of technology, the advent of service learning, and the impact of critical pedagogy.

College developmental reading programs currently face a push for mandatory assessment and placement. In the past, survival and maintaining the status quo were the thrusts of planning in many college developmental reading programs. Frequently, the goal was to preserve the traditional values
and systems. Universities and colleges looked to developmental programs to help them retain more underprepared students. Currently, college developmental reading programs not only help to keep students in college during an era of dwindling enrollments, but also provide meaningful and measurable support for the academically underprepared. For this reason, some research calls for mandatory assessment and placement in developmental courses. Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham (1997) report that "mandatory placement insures that larger numbers of weaker students participate in developmental programs" (p. 6). They report that when mandatory placement is part of a college developmental program, there is higher retention at both two-year and four-year institutions. This higher retention is largely due to increased success in developmental reading, mathematics and writing courses.

Another important and challenging aspect of developmental reading education today is the use of technology, particularly computer-based projects and environments. Many developmental educators were trained to conduct library research through the use of card catalogs, readers' guides, and indices of current periodicals. Given this background, current technology -- use of Muds (Multi-user Domains), E-mail, distance learning, bibliographic search engines, Usenet groups, and the World Wide Web -- can seem overwhelming.

However, despite their trepidation, the benefits of this new technology are evident to college developmental reading teachers. Increasingly, they perceive the links among constructivism, technology and learning. They see support for the principles of constructivism in the environments, contexts and authentic "worlds" their students can experience and explore. Stefl-Mabry (1998) reports Web-based instruction promotes independent learning skills and individualized learning styles. Instructors as well as students can create their own home pages. Students can go out on the World Wide Web and find out what methods and strategies help other students to learn and study.
They find their syllabi, assignments, and research information on the web. College developmental readers and writers communicate with their instructors and fellow classmates through electronic mail. They explore current issues and course themes in chat rooms and they use Internet sources to conduct research. Today's developmental reading and writing instructors have their students share journal entries and literary letters via electronic mail and, through the use of some new interactive technology, use slide shows, Power Point demonstrations, and conference rooms to create environments where students can practice using their emerging reading and writing strategies in more authentic contexts.

Distance education has emerged as perhaps the most rapidly growing form of instructional technology. In fact, the term "distance education" has been applied to a wide spectrum of instructional forms, including print, radio, television, satellite, and computer education (Dede, 1996, Peters, 1993). A particularly appropriate technology for developmental reading instruction, distance education appeals to non-traditional students, because it is cost effective and accessible. It has served as both an innovative instructional tool and an effective way to meet the needs of a larger, more diverse student body. An interesting distance learning portal is <http://www.hoyle.com/distance.html>.

With the growth worldwide of teaching and learning on the Internet, there has been increased concern about the nature and quality of online higher education. The National Education Association sponsored a study of good distance learning programs and recently published a list of 24 benchmarks of quality distance learning. The Web location is <http://www.ihep.com/PR17.html>. To formulate the benchmarks, the authors identified practical strategies being used by U.S. colleges considered to be leaders in online distance education.
In yet another innovation, college teachers are creating service learning courses that integrate their developmental reading curriculum with community service. Students read and discuss social issues in the classroom setting, decide on a problem, research the problem on the Web, write multiple drafts of their papers, work in a community service setting, and publish their papers on the Internet Writing Project. Herzberg (1994) claims that "writing personal responses to community service experiences is an important part of processing the experiences" (p. 309). Service learning provides opportunities for developmental students to read and write authentic texts while developing reading, writing, and critical thinking strategies and participating in community service.

Finally critical pedagogy, stimulated by the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1994) and others, promises to play an increasingly important role in college developmental reading programs. Critical pedagogues around the world repeatedly make the point that a focus on instructional methods, alone, without the inclusion of critical engagement with issues of class, race, and gender, results in "an empty instructional shell, a technology of instruction rather than the heart and soul of true education" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 90). In their examination of contemporary adult literacy programs, they argue that teachers in skills-based literacy programs often encounter problems with transfer, retention, and actual literacy growth. These are long-standing problems associated with the field of adult literacy. Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) argue for both process-based teaching and learning and critical engagement with significant social and political issues that are significant in the lives of the students. Through this process, students become active agents in their own transformation.

Purcell-Gates, Degener, and Jacobson (1998) conducted a survey of adult literacy programs across the United States and created a typology of programs along two instructional dimensions: (a) dialogic/monologic and (b) life-contextualized/decontextualized. From this survey research and
their study of a Freirean-based adult literacy class, Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) draw some insights for adult education in other contexts. They have implications for college developmental reading programs. They argue that teachers and students need to take part in a true dialogue, what they call dialogic, rather than monologic, learning. What are the power relationships between college developmental students and their teachers and administrators? In traditional programs, the teachers and administrators are the authority figures who make the critical decisions about what students need to know and how they need to learn it. This is monologic learning. In dialogic situations, teachers work in very specific ways -- the deep, sociocultural ways advocated by Paulo Freire -- to learn about their students. In a dialogic program, teachers become absolutely familiar with their students, their lives, their histories, their languages, and their present sociocultural contexts. Using this notion of critical pedagogy, college developmental reading teachers and their students learn together.

The other dimension that emerged from the typology report (Purcell-Gates, et al., 1998) was the life-contextualized/decontextualized dimension. To what extent do college developmental reading programs reflect real-life, authentic reading and writing activities and materials in their instruction? Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) argue that the concept of life-contextualized learning is often very complex and difficult to understand. The authors of the typology define this construct as "literacy work grounded in the life of the student outside of the classroom" (Purcell-Gates, et al., 1998, p.2). How often do we survey our college developmental students to determine why they need to improve their literacy skills? How often are our materials and activities grounded in these real-life purposes?

Limnality is the recognition that persons on the margins of society are pregnant with possibilities for transforming society (Pitman, 1987; Savage, 1988). As developmental reading
teachers we are certainly on the margins of academic society. Although we lack any obvious signs of power, as teachers and researchers, we can form coalitions and become agents for change. The future of developmental reading education remains in the hands of creative and well trained instructors who make use of current research, pedagogy and technology to change the status quo and enhance their students' learning.

References


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