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BUILDING A COMMUNITY ON THE FAST TRACK: ENG. 09/111 AT CENTRAL VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE (CVCC) AS A TIER C MODEL

BY LANA VÉLEZ WITH KEVIN RILEY

It's the last day of classes, and when I walk into the classroom, I see students placing refreshments on a table and snapping photographs of each other with their cell phones. Some are exchanging phone numbers, and most are friends on Facebook. This group has become close; students have spent fifty minutes a day, four days a week, together in a special sixteen-week course—English 09/111.

Development of Eng. 09/111 at CVCC

English 09/111 offers a unique opportunity for students who are not quite ready for freshmen composition, but more than likely do not need an entire semester of developmental English.

“English 09/111 offers a unique opportunity for students who are not quite ready for freshmen composition, but ... do not need an entire semester of developmental English. In one semester, they both review developmental content and complete English 111.”

In one semester, they both review developmental content and complete English 111; they earn one credit for English 09 and three credits for English 111. With the Virginia Community College System's redesign plan for developmental English, this course comes close to the qualifications for Tier C. However, the idea to develop this “fast track” class originated from a

Virginia Association for Developmental Education (VADE) conference held at Central Virginia Community College in September of 2006. Dr. Diane Carr and Dr. Janice Jake from Midlands Technical College (MTC), Columbia, South Carolina, were the keynote speakers, and they discussed programs developed on their campus that were designed to ‘fast-track’ marginally developmental students. Although MTC had initiated programs in both math and English, their success rate was much higher in English.

After the conference, faculty members in CVCC's English department began discussing the possibility of creating a similar "fast-track" class. Dr. Muriel Mickles, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, recalls that process:

Through the efforts of Mrs. Joy Bashore, former CVCC English Instructor, Dr. Gary Randolph, CVCC English Chair, and the English Department, the HSSDivision decided to provide an abbreviated developmental class for students who need only basic skill review and writing practice, and follow the class with a coordinated English 111 class that allows students to stay on a traditional schedule. This project was done in an effort to increase success and retention rates in developmental writing, as well as in English composition courses.

During subsequent meetings, English faculty discussed the college's current English 03 Writing Improvement developmental class and its core content. We also discussed how to determine placement test scores for English 09. Dr. Mickles recalls the rationale behind determining eligibility for this class:

The decision to offer English 09/111 stemmed from the reality that all students entering CVCC who plan to take an English class are required to take a placement test. Students who scored into a particular domain are automatically assigned to English 03 Writing Improvement for a full semester. Instructors found, however, that the student skill range in English 03 was fairly broad. While many students had mastered only a few writing skills, others had mastered several skills and only required a review. Also, many students had little concept of organization, unity, coherence, and support, while others only required reinforcement of these skills. ... The English department decided to offer the Eng. 09/111 combination for students who place at the high end of the continuum for developmental placement.

The group decided that students needed to score between 70-75 on the Writing Skills portion of the Compass Test, and a 78 or higher on the Reading Skills test. If students take the Asset test instead, they must score in the range of 39-42 on the Writing Skills test, and have a 40 or higher for Reading Skills. Students also must see an Academic Counselor to enroll in English 09/111 to ensure that they are qualified for the class.

I was honored to be presented with the challenge of organizing and teaching this new course. Using input from my colleagues, I determined what our faculty considered to be the most important elements of English 03. I spent the summer of 2007 writing a course text and workbook; this process enabled us to individualize the program more toward our students' needs, and save students money. After using these materials for several years, I revised the text and workbook in the summer of 2010. Colleagues in the art department (Donna Hobbs and Jill Markwood) worked with me on the project, incorporating photography and designing the lay-out to make the texts more visually appealing. Xanadu printed the text and workbook, and they were offered at a very reasonable price – under \$25 for both books.

The English 09 Text and Workbook

The textbook provides students with a review of basic grammar and punctuation and introduces them to the writing process and how to develop argument papers. The Table of Contents reads as follows:

- Chapter 1: Parts of Speech
- Chapter 2: Roles in Sentences
- Chapter 3: Simple Sentences and Compound Sentences
- Chapter 4: Complex Sentences
- Chapter 5: Common Grammatical Errors
- Chapter 6: Semicolons and Commas
- Chapter 7: The Writing Process
- Chapter 8: Writing a Paragraph
- Chapter 9: Writing an Essay
- Chapter 10: Research and MLA Documentation
- Chapter 11: Random Notes About Writing
- Appendix: Example Students' Papers

My philosophy is that if students can understand how a sentence works, they will be better able to develop paragraphs and essays; however, students also begin writing early in the semester. As we cover the material in the first six chapters, students complete accompanying exercises in the workbook.

It was my intention to create a “user friendly” text that students would find accessible. When describing the writing process, for example, I introduced the idea of “PAWS”: Purpose, Audience, Writer, and Subject. Students find “PAWS” easy to remember as they think about these key elements. Chapter 11, “Random Notes About Writing,” is a collection of ideas, many from colleagues, about issues to consider when writing. One example from this section is: “Show; don’t just tell. Examples and support are important.” Another suggestion is, “Avoid referencing what you’re going to do; just do it!” Students seem to appreciate the straightforward approach.

The Structure and Community in Eng. 09/111

The first sections of English 09/111 were offered in the fall of 2007, and we currently offer three sections in the fall and two sections in the spring. Establishing a sense of community is crucial for a course like this one, so I begin the semester with an activity that enables students to relax and get to know each other. On the first day of classes, I distribute containers of Play-Doh and have students make something that reflects their personality, or a hobby or interest of theirs. This activity seems to eliminate some of the first-day stress, and provides them with a creative way of introducing themselves. Creating this sense of community is important, since these students work closely together, sharing their writing in peer response activities and encouraging each other.

Although students’ transcripts show two classes, I encourage them to view English 09/111 as one course that lasts the entire semester. The course begins with the developmental aspects of English, but students also start writing soon, so they can incorporate what they are learning in their own writing. One of their first assignments involves writing ten statements to introduce themselves. Those statements, however, have to begin with “I am not....” Soon after, and still while covering the developmental material, students read Chapter 8, “Writing a Paragraph.” They then choose one “I am not” statement and write a paragraph to support their main idea.

Students understand at the beginning of the semester that in order to stay in the English 111 part of the course, they must earn an “S” in English 09; to earn an “S,” they must have at least a 75 average. Their grade in the English 09 section of the course is based on three tests and some initial writing assignments, primarily paragraphs. Tests are completed and graded in advance

of the withdrawal date, so that anyone not successfully completing English 09 can withdraw from English 111.

The English 111 section has the same requirements as any English 111, but I do not require an additional textbook. For readings, students use CVCC's databases. In fact, students vote on controversial topics they would like to discuss. After visiting the databases, they come to class with three possible discussion topics. We put the topics on the board, talk briefly about them, and then students vote. This method allows students to discuss and write about current topics that interest them; they also take ownership in the class by voting on the topics we discuss. All students write response papers on the discussion topics, and they choose other topics, again using the databases, for their major essays.

With enrollment limited to eighteen, I am able to provide individualized instruction. I get to know students well, and as a result, I recognize their individual challenges. In addition to providing feedback on all their drafts, I also hold conferences during which I sit down with the student and go over his/her paper. This individualized attention is often what these students need to succeed.

Assessing the Program – What the Students Say

The students populating English 09/111 classes come from very diverse backgrounds. A dual enrollment student may be sitting right next to a displaced worker on Trade Act Assistance, who has not been in a classroom for many years. There are also the students who have struggled to pass English 111 before, who with the extra time and work provided by English 09, are finally successful. Our college is also seeing an increase in students for whom English is a second language, and they, too, benefit from the individualized instruction. All these students come together to form one of the most unique classes at CVCC.

Melanie Freeman, who completed English 09/111 in the spring of 2011, describes her past educational experience as “homeschooling gone awry.” Melanie received her G.E.D. and waited several years before gaining enough courage to apply to CVCC. English 09/111 allowed her to become more confident in her abilities to succeed in college:

For me, the biggest advantage of taking the Eng. 09/111 course was getting a firm grasp on the building blocks of English (grammar, punctuation, etc.) and learning how to utilize these things to communicate through writing. Not getting hung up or confused about those things later on gave me confidence, and in turn, encouraged

me to be creative. Those building blocks have continued to help me improve, especially concerning my ability to interpret, understand, and analyze assigned texts in other college courses.

This sense of confidence is something many students mention as helping them, not only in English, but also in other college classes. Cynthia King, who is currently enrolled in English 09/111 (spring 2012), says this class has encouraged her to stay in college:

I haven't been in school for years. I didn't finish high school, and then years later I got my GED. I didn't think there was any way I could go to college, and really, there's no way I would have stayed here without this class. I'm taking psychology, and on my first response paper, I lost a lot of points on my writing. On the next psychology paper, I thought about what I was learning in English, and I applied those ideas to my paper. I got a perfect score! To be honest, if I wasn't in this class, I probably would have dropped out already. That's how much this class is helping me. It helps my confidence.

Chelsea Campbell, who completed English 09/111 in the fall of 2011, also mentioned gaining self-assuredness. "Although the developmental part of the class was short, I feel that this class really helped me gain confidence in my writing. Before this class, English was my least favorite subject, and I hated for anyone to read what I wrote. I liked the small class, and it has given me confidence." Students seem to feel that it is not only the content of the class but also the sense of community and encouragement that allows them to gain confidence in their abilities.

Not all students in English 09/111 have had negative experiences with English or high school. Jesse Bowling, who completed English 09/111 in the fall of 2011, was an AP English student in high school:

Throughout high school, I was placed in honors and AP English. Such classes were fast-paced, required lots of reading, and focused a lot on analyzing essays. Thus, not a lot of time was spent on grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. The fast track course covered all these things and more, and it really helped me strengthen my writing. In addition, it was a very good transition from high school to college.

Geoffrey Hicks, another student from Fall 2011, is only thirteen years old and already had a love for English before taking this class. He states that English 09 provided him with a good background in grammar, and he found the text for the class helpful. “I really enjoyed the English 09/111 text because it was easy to follow and right to the point. It was one of the best grammar books I have ever used!” Geoffrey also says that the course helped to prepare him for college-level writing. “I have always had a positive attitude about writing, but it has become even more positive by taking English 09/111. My general attitude about writing remains an attitude of joy. The class has prepared me for college-level writing because I can now research, reflect, analyze, and write with greater thoughtfulness in ways that I have never done before.”

Assessing the Program – What the Numbers Say

From the Fall 2007 semester through Fall 2010, 279 students have taken English 09/111. Of those 279 students, 181 (65%) of those students have passed the 111 part of the class with a grade of C or better.

Grade Breakdown of English 09/11 Students from Fall 2007 – Fall 2010

Grade	A	B	C	D	F	Other*
Students	41	80	61	30	42	25

Students who have moved on to English 112 or higher level English classes have also been successful. From Fall 2007 through Spring 2010, 104 students from English 09/111 have taken a higher level English class, with 80 (77%) of them getting a C or better in their class.

Grades for English 09/111 in higher level English classes from Fall 2007 – Spring 2010

Grade	A	B	C	D	F	Other*
Students	16	32	32	7	9	8

**Other includes audits, withdrawals, and incompletes.*

Dr. Mickles, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, says this class fosters retention and enables students to “stay on track for graduation in two years.” She notes that students often express their appreciation of the course directly to her:

I have had more than one student come to me after completing this class and praise the class and the instructor. Many have indicated that before taking the class, they “hated writing” and were actually dreading the class. After the completion of the class, I could see in these students confidence, motivation, excitement, and increased desire to move forward to the next level.

The Future of Eng. 09/111

In the fall of 2011, I served as a CVCC representative on the Curriculum Team for Developmental English Redesign. In terms of the new three-tiered system, English 09/111 comes quite close to the new Tier C course. With a new placement test, the determination of who can enroll in English 09 will certainly change. Our English 09 portion will also need to become a two-credit class rather than the current one credit, and with professional development regarding teaching reading, I look forward to incorporating more review in that area. Most students who enroll in this class recognize that they have a unique opportunity to “fast track” their developmental experience so they can continue with their regular college curriculum, and they take full advantage of this opportunity. As an instructor, it is rewarding to be a part of this community and watch many, with encouragement, transform from timid, insecure writers to empowered college students.

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