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Using Affective Assessment to Understand our Students' Identities as Readers (and Non-Readers)

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By Susannah M. Givens

Consider your responses to the following questions before reading further:

- In general, how do you feel about reading?
- What do you do well as a reader?

My guess is that, for many of you, the responses to the previous two questions indicate at least a mildly positive attitude toward reading. Even if reading is not one of your favorite pastimes, I suspect that you realize the value of it. I also imagine that you are able to identify some strengths when it comes to your reading practices.

Now contrast your responses with those of my students. For the first question, I typically receive few enthusiastic responses, many unaffected responses, and several negative responses (e.g. "I hate it."). For the second question about what they do well as a reader, I am always disheartened by the eight to ten responses per semester of "I don't know" or "Nothing."

The two questions I posed to you are taken from a Reading Attitudes Survey that I developed when I began teaching developmental reading five years ago. I administer this survey to my developmental reading students during the first week of the semester. In addition to the placement assessments that indicate students' readiness for the courses and other cognitive assessments and writing samples I administer during the first week, I also believe it is crucial to understand the attitudes and motivations of my students.

"These types of assessment will not determine the grades we give students' work, but they can determine the instructional moves we make to help students develop dispositions that lead to academic success."

The students' responses to the questions posed in the survey are quite informative; however, as a teacher of reading and as someone who loves to read, the negative comments always crush me. Soon after I began using the Reading Attitudes Survey, I began to wonder what

types of educational experiences had led some students to develop such strong feelings of dislike for reading and low self-efficacy; they have to have been very negative and frustrating. In fact, as I inquired about this further in both my own practice and in research I was completing for my dissertation (Givens, 2008), my speculations were confirmed. I increasingly recognize how critical it is that I take the time to understand the affective characteristics of my students in order to best meet their needs through my instruction.

Rationale for Affective Assessment

As Saxon, Levine-Brown, and Boylan (2008) have concluded in their research, the affective domain of assessment is often overlooked in developmental education. Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, and Davis (2007) report that only seven percent of community colleges engage in affective assessment. Affective assessment focuses on characteristics such as an individual's motivation, attitude toward learning, and feelings of self-efficacy. It is clear from the research that many students enrolled in developmental studies courses may struggle with motivation and confidence levels (CCSSE, n.d.; Grubb, 1999; Roeuche & Roeuche, 1993). Some students become even more discouraged because they have been placed in a developmental studies course that they view as a waste of time or believe offers them nothing in terms of credits toward a degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

Unfortunately, the majority of assessment occurring at colleges and universities in the United States is cognitive, to the exclusion of the affective domain. As Saxon et al. (2008) state, "Although the information from such [cognitive] instruments is generally valid, reliable, and effective for placement, it does not address all the factors that might contribute to student success" (p. 1). Saxon et al. also cite Benjamin Bloom's claim that "25 percent of student performance is determined by affective characteristics" (p. 1). Regardless of how much a student knows or is able to accomplish as determined or predicted by a cognitive measure, that student will be able to achieve nothing without the necessary motivation, confidence, and attitude toward learning.

Given the focus on increasing student persistence at many community colleges through programs such as *Achieving the Dream*, it seems more than appropriate that faculty and institutions integrate more affective measures into their assessments of student readiness. These types of assessment will not determine the grades we give students' work, but they can determine the instructional moves we make to help students

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develop dispositions that lead to academic success. A focus on affective assessment is important in order to respond to those students with low levels of motivation and confidence and with negative attitudes toward schooling in general.

Affective assessment is particularly important for the area of developmental reading for three reasons. First, success rates (as defined by persistence) are low for students who take developmental reading courses; for example, as Adelman (1996) reports, a student's chance of completing a degree is considerably lower if he or she is required to take a developmental reading course. Students in developmental studies courses are those most in need of affective assessment so that faculty can determine more effective approaches to instruction. Second, reading is the foundation for accessing most any college course. If a student believes he or she is a poor reader, how will that student approach any course with the belief that success is a real possibility? Finally, an examination of the Virginia Community College System course description for "Preparation for College Reading II" (ENG 05), the level two developmental reading course, mandates that we focus on affect. The description indicates that ENG 05 will "Help students . . . increase appreciation of reading." How can professors assist students in increasing "appreciation" – much less measure "appreciation" – if they do not understand the dispositions of their students? Affective measures would help in realizing the course purpose. Despite the many reasons to engage in affective assessment and the fact that research shows that "motivational processes are the foundation for coordinating cognitive goals and strategies in reading" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 408), such measures continue to be sparse.

Numerous affective instruments are commercially available, but some institutions and faculty may express concern over the cost of some of them. However, there is an alternative to purchasing commercially available assessments: it is quite feasible for instructors to create their own instruments that are targeted toward the affective domain. In fact, I have created several assignments in my reading courses that I use to better understand the affective stances and needs of my students, as well as a general assessment that I have shared with faculty across all disciplines at my campus.

Reading Attitudes Survey

During the first week of classes, I often administer a Reading Attitudes Survey – the one referenced at the beginning of this article – in my "Preparation for College Reading Improvement I" and "II" (ENG 04 and

05) developmental reading courses (see Appendix A for survey). I always explain to my students that I designed this survey to learn more about who they are as readers and that the surveys tell me much more about them as individuals than a single standardized measure or writing sample. In an age in which standardized assessments are the norm, the students often seem refreshed to find that their identities, strengths, and needs are not reduced solely to numbers. I assign this survey for homework, and in almost all cases, the completion rate has been 100 percent, a rarity for developmental studies courses. I must note that this assignment is assessed based on completion. Students are encouraged to be honest, and I emphasize that they will not lose points based on any negative responses.

Students' responses to the survey questions provide an initial snapshot of students' attitudes toward reading, their experiences with reading, their self-assessments of their strengths and needs, and their goals as readers. The students' responses are a helpful starting point in how I approach students individually. From the outset of the course, I am aware of which students already are quite confident and goal-oriented and which will need to be steered in that direction with more individualized attention.

Reading Process Reflections

More recently, I developed three Reading Process Reflections, which the students complete at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the semester (see Appendix B). I have used these assessments in my developmental reading courses (ENG 04 and ENG 05), as well as in "Critical Reading and Study Skills" (ENG 108). These three reflective papers allow students to examine their own attitudes toward reading and their identities as readers, to set goals for themselves as readers, and to examine and monitor the changes that occur over the course of the semester. These reflections are evaluated not on positive or negative responses but on whether or not the students completely and thoroughly address the questions posed and the extent to which they demonstrate the ability to think critically about their reading processes and development as readers.

Following are excerpts taken from one student's reading process reflections over the course of the semester. These excerpts demonstrate the types of affective changes that can occur during a semester. In the first reflection, this student wrote the following:

> I don't like to read. I haven't read a book since I was in high school.
> I kind of dread having to read something; I think reading is boring.
> I guess I feel this way because I never was a reader. As a young
> person I never read in my spare time, so I guess I never developed a

love for reading. I think maybe part of the reason I felt this way is because I don't feel like I'm a good or fast enough reader, probably because I haven't done much of it, so I didn't have the opportunity to improve my skills.

An excerpt from her second reflection demonstrates a mild improvement in her attitude toward reading, as well as her engagement with the book *A Hope in the Unseen*, which we read during the course. This is quite a difference from the person who hadn't "read a book since . . . high school." This excerpt also shows how she is questioning and evaluating the reasons for her engagement with the text:

I think my attitude towards reading has changed quite a bit this semester. I do not dread it like I used to. Instead I enjoy it and find it more interesting. Now I view it like an opportunity to learn new things and improve my vocabulary. I am not saying I have become an avid reader, but I do view it in a more positive way. I do not know if it is because I never read books in the past so I do not have anything to compare it to, or if this is just a good book, but I have really enjoyed reading *A Hope in the Unseen*.

Finally, her third reflection shows definite changes since the beginning of the semester:

I used to feel overwhelmed by my textbook reading assignments and never read for my own pleasure. . . . My attitude toward reading has definitely changed for the better this semester. I am not saying I will become an avid reader, but I do plan to read more often for my own enjoyment. It is kind of funny . . . when I go to a bookstore I like to look at factual books, rather than fiction. There is so much you can learn by reading, but I would like to pick out a nice story to read. I saw one book about a dog that American soldiers befriended in Iraq; I think I would like that one.

These responses indicate the changes that can take place when students' affective characteristics are evaluated and monitored by not only the professor but also the students' themselves.

Literacy Narrative

To provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their literacy and language experiences, I developed a literacy narrative assignment for my developmental writing students, although it could certainly be woven into a reading course, as well. Following is a general description of the assignment:

A literacy narrative is an essay in which you share a story about

your personal engagement with reading, writing, thinking, and/ or language.   For this assignment you will write a narrative essay based on some past experience – either from long ago or in the recent past – related to literacy. This could be a positive or negative experience, and it could be an academic or non-academic experience. Regardless, you should connect the experience to your current feelings about reading, writing, thinking, and/or language. Your purpose for this essay is to communicate to your readers the way(s) in which you have been shaped as a reader/writer/ thinker/language user in your narrative. In doing so, you will use description, narration, and reflection.

I created this assignment based on a presentation that I attended in September 2008 at the Fourth International Conference on Research and Access in Developmental Education (Marrott & McMurtrey, 2008). In addition to meeting the requirement that the students write a narrative essay, this assignment also facilitates students' understanding that there are multiple, valid literacies that we practice throughout our lives across different situations, and that academic reading and writing is just one of these multiple literacies (Street, 2005). Until students realize this, it becomes difficult to make the jump from writing like they speak to writing using academic language, structure, and syntax.

The literacy narrative assignment always follows a discussion of multiple literacies. For example, I might initiate the discussion by asking them to identify how the ways in which they talk to their friends, to customers at their jobs, to their parents, and to the other players on their sports team differ and how they use language in those situations for different purposes. We would then proceed to compare and contrast those context-specific ways of using language to the academic texts we read and write in school. Academic writing is yet one more way of communicating and using language to accomplish a purpose; students must be able to understand the academic texts they read, as well.

The students' literacy narratives have covered a range of literacy experiences, many of them positive ones. Topics have included discovery of the treasure of books and information in a library for the first time, the understanding of the power of speaking, and the experiences of learning a new language and culture upon immigrating to America. These narratives not only inform me about my students' language and literacy experiences but also force the students to reflect on how language and literacy are at work in their lives.

As with the previous assignments, their positive and negative

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responses are not evaluated for this essay. Rather, I evaluate these essays based on the same elements as any other essay: focus, structure, organization, detail and description, grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Expanding Affective Assessment across the Curriculum

Two experiences led me to begin to share the importance of affective assessment with faculty across the disciplines on my campus. First, I realized many instructional benefits from the types of assessments presented in the previous section, and I thought they would be valuable to others – not only to English faculty but to faculty across *all* disciplines. In addition, a history professor on my campus had secured a professional development grant focused on reading across the curriculum during the 2007-2008 academic year.[1] Her grant was focused on examining why so many students tend not to read their textbooks and implementing instructional strategies and other projects to help students make better use of assigned textbook reading. It occurred to me that affective assessment intersected with my colleague's reading-across-the-curriculum project: students' affective needs – not only their repertoire of strategies for accessing textbooks – were an important consideration in whether or not they were reading the course texts and with what level of success. Therefore, I applied for a stipend and adapted my Reading Attitudes Survey so that faculty across all disciplines could use it in their courses. This Survey of Reading Attitudes and Practices is included in Appendix C.

To make this survey available to the faculty, I sent an email to all faculty members on my campus in January 2009, asking them to contact me if they were interested in using the survey. Thirteen faculty from various disciplines requested the survey. I emailed them the survey (see Appendix C), along with instructions and suggestions for using the survey (see Appendix D). Midway through the semester, I followed up with them to request feedback on how they had used the survey and what they had learned. Many of them chose not to use it, but among the five who did, I received feedback in response to several follow-up questions. Following are key results from their feedback:

- There was a common theme that many students find reading in general to be rewarding but textbook reading to be boring. This "boring" nature of textbooks emphasizes the need for attention to affective characteristics.
- Most instructors assign textbook readings once or twice weekly. Textbooks tend to range between 400 and 500 pages in length. When one considers the small type and lack of visual features of many texts, it

is easy to understand how college textbooks could prove daunting to a student with little confidence or motivation to read.

- In an effort to motivate students to complete course readings, some instructors use additional readings – news articles or online articles – or require students to locate readings relevant to course topics and summarize or present them to the class for discussion purposes.

- The instructors also reported that they were making or plan to make the following changes, each of which addresses affect. One instructor plans to assign more supplementary readings in addition to the text to increase interest. Another instructor used the discussion board in his hybrid course to discuss readings, and he plans to use it more often in future semesters as a place for students to ask questions about parts of the readings that they do not understand. He noted that when the readings are tied to other assessments and learning activities (e.g. discussions and papers), the readings prove to be most valuable. One history instructor is going to require the use of evidence from the text in future papers. She also is encouraging students to meet with her to review examples of their note-taking and the ways in which they annotate the text, and she awards points for demonstrating the use of these types of learning strategies. She has also tied weekly in-class writing prompts more closely with the text. All of these changes support increasing interest and confidence in reading among students with low levels of motivation and self-efficacy.

I plan to send this survey to instructors again in subsequent semesters with the goal of increasing faculty participation.

Benefits to Faculty and Students

For developmental reading faculty, the benefits for using affective assessments are obvious. With information about the students' affective characteristics based on more than anecdotes and isolated observations, they will be able to individualize their approaches to students. Based on what I learn each time I use these assessments, I have a strong sense within the first two weeks of the courses of which students are motivated and will need little affective support and which students will need more encouragement, gentle prodding, and individual attention throughout the semester. It is critical that we identify these students early if we are to have any positive effect on them during the short time they are in our courses. In addition, at the end of the semester, I can see definite changes in students' affective characteristics as measured by post assessments and reflections.

Many faculty outside of the English discipline might argue that

reading does not fall within the realm of what they teach. Certainly, it is true that they have plenty of content to cover in a short amount of time. However, as I have argued, literacy and language provide the foundation for accessing any college course, and administering a brief assessment requires only a miniscule amount of time, especially in comparison to the knowledge it generates. Professors need to be aware of the supports that their students may need that are not directly related to their understanding of concepts but rather to their ability to access the course texts. Using a general survey such as the one I developed will enable them to provide support for these students or to direct them to services such as tutors and reading and writing centers located on their campuses.

For students, the benefits of affective assessment are also numerous. Merely considering the questions posed by affective assessments forces them to think about the roles that reading and, more generally, literacy and language play in their lives. For many students, this can lead to an expanded understanding of language and literacy within the many realms of their lives – not just in terms of academics. Students also may develop metacognitive skills and awareness through the act of intentionally reflecting on and evaluating their own learning. The ultimate benefit is that professors' knowledge of their students' affective characteristics leads to more targeted instruction and successful learning experiences for students. Because students are able to focus on affective development in concert with cognitive development, they are more likely to be successful.

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Appendix A: Reading Attitudes Survey

1. In general, how do you feel about reading?
2. In your opinion and experience, what are the characteristics of a "good" reader?
3. What do you do when you are reading and come to a word that you don't know?
4. If you don't understand what you read, what do you do?
5. What do you do to help you remember what you read?
6. When and how did you learn to read?
7. Complete the following: I enjoy reading about ……
8. What kinds of texts (magazines, internet articles, books, etc.) do you read…
   a. at home?
   b. at school?
   c. at work?
9. Do you have a favorite writer, author, or book?   yes   no
   If yes, name the writer/author or book?
10. What do you find challenging or difficult about reading?
11. What do you do well as a reader?
12. Think about what you would like to learn from this course to help you become a better reader. List one or two goals that you would like to set for yourself to accomplish in this course. *(Note: Do not write that your goal is to pass the course; be specific about what you want to focus on in relation to reading.)*

Appendix B: Reading Process Reflections

Reflection 1
Write a 1-to-2-page reflection that incorporates responses to the following questions:
1. How do you feel about reading in general? What is your attitude toward reading? What do you believe about reading?
2. Why do you feel the way you do about reading? What experiences led you to develop your attitude toward and feelings about reading?
3. How would you describe yourself as a reader? What kind of reader are you? What are your strengths and challenges with regards to reading?
4. Based on your responses to the first three questions, what goal(s) do you have for yourself in this course? (Stating that your goal is to pass the course is a "cop-out" – be specific.)

Reflection 2
Read over the first Reading Process Reflection, which you prepared at the beginning of the semester. Reflect on any changes to your reading process that have occurred this semester and write a 1-to-2-page reflection that incorporates responses to the following questions:
1. What changes have you made so far this semester to your reading process? How have your strategies changed?
2. Has your attitude toward reading changed at all this semester? Explain.
3. How would you describe your experience of reading *[insert name of novel or other supplementary text]*? Has it been a positive or negative reading experience for you? Explain.
4. Re-examine the goals that you identified in your first Reading Process Reflection. How are you progressing toward your goal(s)? Do you have any new goals that you would like to add? If so, state them.

Reflection 3
Review the work you have completed this semester. Reflect on any changes to your reading process that have occurred this semester. Write a 1-to-2-page reflection that incorporates responses to the following questions:
1. What changes have you made this semester to your reading process? How have your strategies changed? What do your assignments demonstrate that you have learned about reading?
2. Has your attitude toward reading changed at all this semester? Explain.
3. What have you accomplished this semester in relation to reading?
4. Identify at least one reading-related goal that you would like to focus on after this course.

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Appendix C: Survey of Reading Attitudes and Practices

Please respond honestly to the following questions about your reading attitudes, experiences, and strategies. There are no wrong answers.

1. In general, how do you feel about reading?
2. What do you find challenging or difficult about reading?
3. What are your strengths as a reader?
4. What do you find rewarding about reading?
5. When you don't understand what you read, what do you do?
6. What percentage of assigned readings do you typically complete in your college courses?
    - A.   None of the readings
    - B.   25 percent or less of the readings
    - C.   More than 25 percent, but less than half of the readings
    - D.   More than half, but less than 75 percent of the readings
    - E.   More than 75 percent, but not quite all of the readings
    - F.   All of the readings
7. When completing assigned readings for previous college courses, what did you do to help you understand and remember what you read? (If this is your first college course, then consider reading assignments from high school or other settings when answering this question.)
8. In previous college courses, what motivated you to complete the assigned readings? (If this is your first college course, then consider reading assignments from high school or other settings when answering this question.)
9. Preview the text(s) for *this course* and consider the reading assignments that are required. What do you find challenging about the readings assigned for *this course*?
10. What strategies, if any, do you plan to use to help you with the reading assignments for *this course*?
11. What learning activities and resources, if any, would help you to use the assigned texts for *this course* more efficiently?
12. What would motivate you to complete the assigned readings for *this course*?

Appendix D: Instructions for Using the Survey of Reading Attitudes and Practices

Administer the Survey

1. Ask your students to complete this survey during the first two weeks of the course. Make sure that you have provided students with an overview of the types of reading assignments they will be required to complete during the course and that you have introduced the course texts to them prior to administering the survey.

2. Be sure that you give the students adequate time to complete the survey. If you are concerned about taking up too much class time, I recommend giving the survey as a homework assignment so that students can take as much time as necessary to thoughtfully and thoroughly respond to each question.

3. Make sure that students are aware that there are no right or wrong answers in response to the survey questions and that the reason you are administering the survey is to learn more about their reading attitudes, practices, and experiences so that you can help them make the most of the reading assignments in your course.

Analyze and Use the Results

1. Qualitatively analyze the students' responses. Here are some suggestions:
   - Look for patterns. For example, do several students have similar responses to the same question or demonstrate similar needs?
   - Are there individual students who demonstrate particularly positive attitudes toward reading or particularly effective strategies that would be helpful in making the most of your assigned readings?
   - Are there students about whom you have serious concerns regarding their ability and/or motivation to complete and make effective use of the reading assignments for the course?

2. Use what you have learned from your analysis. Here are some suggestions:
   - Identify reading strategies that you could model or demonstrate to the class. Please feel free to email me if you would like some suggestions.
   - Identify students already practicing effective strategies and ask them to share them with the class.
   - Consider any modifications you might want to make to your reading

assignments, such as providing focus questions to accompany a reading assignment or previewing the reading with the class.

- Identify any changes that you could make to your assessment practices based on what you learned from your results. How are you going to assess students' completion and understanding of the course readings?
- Direct students whom you think need significant additional support with their reading assignments to The Reading/Writing Center.