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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Since this special issue of Inquiry showcases works originally intended for the canceled New Horizons 2020 conference, our premier teaching and learning event in the Virginia Community College System, we wanted to honor the conference’s featured artist. We are grateful to have Rosemary Gallick’s “Spirits Rising” grace the cover of our journal.

**Featured Artist:** Rosemary Gallick is a Professor of Art and Art History at Northern Virginia Community College

**Artwork Title:** “Spirits Rising”

**Artwork Description:** This acrylic painting was created as a reflection on losing a dear colleague, friend, and well-known national author who was part of the VCCS. When Bob Bausch passed last year, Rosemary wondered where his feisty energy had gone.

"Spirits Rising" is a hopeful and uplifting artwork that transcends the physical world. Gallick believes that the artwork embraces the theme of New Horizons and does visually “imagine the possibilities,” the theme of the canceled conference.
CONTENTS

First in College: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of First-Generation Students
Rebecca Evans, Don Stansberry, Kim E. Bullington, and Dana Burnett

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate first-generation students’ perceptions of how their lived experiences have impacted their academic and non-academic success. The authors utilized focus groups consisting of first-generation students who attended a rural community college and a large, public, metropolitan, research university, and compared their lived experiences. Their findings confirmed some past research that found that a lack of social capital, academic preparation, financial resources, and family support challenge this population of students in their transition to college. However, some of the results contradict past findings which have concluded that part-time enrollment increases the risk of first-generation student attrition. Most of the findings were consistent between the two groups of participants. Findings related to awareness of the availability of support services differed between the two samples.

Reducing Stereotype Threat in the Classroom
Todd K. Platts and Kim Hoosier

This brief pedagogical essay, focusing on social science classrooms, provides fellow instructors with practical strategies and advice in reducing the presence of stereotype threat in their classrooms. Techniques of task reframing, practices of positive affirmation, the providing of constructive criticism, the incorporation of marginalized groups into course content, and suggestions for meeting stereotype threat head-on are discussed as are some strategies students can adopt themselves. While the methods of stereotype threat reduction addressed in this essay can help curtail some of the negative impacts of racism’s micro-level forces, stereotype threat must also be considered a structural problem that requires structural solutions.

Teaching the Syllabus at the Community College
Yuemin He, Ph.D.

Reacting directly to the fact that even the best syllabus is worthless to the student who does not read it, this essay draws inspiration from research of the past decade, especially from the learning-focused syllabus concept that was introduced by three researchers at the University of Virginia, and uses a questionnaire to gauge our community college students’ needs. It suggests specific methods to build the bridge between course content instruction and syllabus teaching. Ultimately, it contributes to the discussion of several important syllabus-related questions: How can instructors use the syllabus as a pedagogical tool to build a strong student rapport? How can instructors balance the syllabus to build a positive academic atmosphere and fulfill course requirements? What are the ways to make the syllabus exemplary for student learning? What standard practices can be established in college syllabus education? The essay aims to increase student autonomy and community and student success, which is the goal of community college education.

Do the Verb. Become the Noun: Writing Towards a New Identity
Mary Tedrow

The initial composition course in the community college has the potential to be a transformative space for the identity formation of adult learners towards the linguistic signifier of scholar. Freshman students of variable ages enter a new culture which demands the negotiation of an alternative academic language, an adaptation to the post-secondary culture, and the development of the critical thinking required for academic work. All of these factors can destabilize identity as students confront long-held beliefs and biases in their studies. Students who are unable to adapt to the new environment are likely to leave without realizing personal goals. Adjusting pedagogy to support students through a transformative stage will increase student success. In this study, freshman composition students reflect on their identities as writers in both pre and post treatment writings. Post treatment reflections revealed a shift in linguistic identity markers, with 85% of students exhibiting language supporting an increased sense of agency and control over their written products and a rising confidence in their sense of self as a writer. This increase in confidence and control indicates that thoughtfully applied pedagogy can shift student identity to that which supports successful post-secondary learning.
Notes in Brief
Mathematics Corequisite Remediation and Direct Enrollment: Addressing Misconceptions and Concerns
Zachary Beamer, Ed.D.

In Fall 2020, the VCCS will begin implementing the Direct Enrollment Pilot, building upon lessons learned in prior reforms and successes of reforms in other states. In the new corequisite model of developmental education, students at the margins of college preparation are placed directly into college coursework with a supplemental support class. This Notes in Brief article summarizes some of the research behind the transition towards this model and the implications of this scholarship on current reform efforts. It directly addresses concerns regarding the move towards corequisite instruction and provides recommendations for how to implement reforms.

Book Review
Review of Flower Darby and James M. Lang’s Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes
Christian Aguiar

In their 2019 book Small Teaching Online, Flower Darby and James M. Lang present a model for online instruction that uses the small teaching approach, which argues that college faculty should look for small, high-impact changes they can make to their teaching practice, not wholesale overhauls. They explore the unique challenges that online learners struggle with, from feeling disengaged to being overwhelmed by the demands of self-directed learning, then offer practical, sustainable solutions for each. Their text thus offers helpful teaching practices both for new online teachers and veterans.

NEW HORIZONS SHOWCASE

Problem-Based Learning: Connecting Sociocultural Theory with Service Learning and Reflection
Lauren Foster

This presentation focuses on the aspects of problem-based learning within writing courses and the interconnectedness to sociocultural theory and its impacts on service learning and reflection. This presentation highlights service learning as an interactive learning tool for students to incorporate problem based learning and introduces reflection as a means of assessment. Through reflection of service learning students can understand the validity of sociocultural impacts within the world around them to help better prepare them to problem solve through writing applications. The goal then is to actively engage students on larger scale by introducing real-world problems and introducing cultural impacts.

Meeting Students Where They Are
Matthew Seth Helmandollar

As a success coach, it can be challenging in identifying and referring students to the resources that can aid, and that can assist with each student’s success during their first year. It is vital to use modern technological resources that are available at no additional cost to institutions, and which students are currently using, to aid in consistency within the field of academic advising and coaching as it pertains to a student’s first year. It engages students to reach out to faculty mentors to provide a “holistic” approach to the student’s success on the campus and meets students where they are via their learning management system. Included is information and feedback obtained through the National Academic Advising Association’s summer institute faculty regarding the usage of technological resources to provide a successful student experience. An overview of the creation and implementation of Canvas to perform the institutions’ advising objectives to create consistency in advising and coaching across campuses, especially in a time in which technology is a requirement as a result of the 2020 SARS-CoV-19 viral pandemic that ceased main campus and offsite campus operations for the remainder of the academic year with potential impacts to the proceeding academic year going forward.

Preparing Students for Digital Era Careers
Melissa Stange, Ph.D.

This paper discusses why technical skills alone will not be enough for students to have successful careers in the digital age. Much of their success will hinge on critical soft skills, such as adaptability, inner strength, holistic thinking, and a collaborative spirit. Examples will be provided for inclusion with a computer science program, but in a way that is easily adaptable to other disciplines.
EDITOR’S NOTE

This special issue of Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges arrives as the landscape of higher education has been profoundly impacted by a worldwide pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 have been felt in all areas of our colleges, and we have all reimagined how our classrooms, offices, student support centers, professional development events, and learning resources can continue to promote student success while foregrounding equity.

In this summer issue, scholars across Virginia cover a wide range of concerns but share a commonality: putting students first. The articles that we are proudly publishing include research-based studies that evolved over several months as authors closely engaged the in-depth guidance of Editorial Board members, practical strategies and reviews of pedagogical tips for higher education professionals, and works that were intended to be shared in Roanoke at our annual New Horizons conference. Those latter contributions are grouped in a New Horizons Showcase.

The combined efforts resulted in accessible, relevant scholarship that will stimulate conversation among faculty, staff, and administrative leaders about our practices, pedagogy, and policies in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and worldwide. I look forward to seeing and hearing these sustained discussions on our campuses, at conferences, and in digital spaces.

Four research-based studies cover a wide range of concerns but share a commonality: putting students first. Rebecca Evans, Don Stansberry, Kim E. Bullington, and Dana Burnett study the perceptions and experiences of first-generation students at two quite different institutions and note the obstacles faced by this population, particularly those who are enrolled part-time. Todd Platt and Kim Hoosier provide practical strategies for stereotype threat reduction in social science classrooms and acknowledge the structural concerns that need to be addressed.

Repeat Inquiry contributor Yuemin He offers strategies for developing a learning-focused syllabus and shares findings of a questionnaire of community college students and their
expectations of an effective syllabus. In her study, Mary Tedrow analyzes student reflections on their identities as writers throughout the course of their freshman composition courses.

A Notes in Brief contribution by Zachary Beamer continues a conversation in our journal regarding mathematics corequisites. Beamer explains the research behind the transition to the Direct Enrollment Pilot and addresses misunderstandings regarding its implementation in the VCCS. Christian Aguiar returns with another book review, this time exploring Flower Darby and James M. Lang’s *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, a text that features small, high-impact updates that faculty can make to their online classes.

The three works featured in our New Horizons showcase – contributions that were initially designed for a face-to-face audience but have instead been transformed into published *Inquiry* material – include a PowerPoint and two Notes in Brief. Lauren K. Foster illustrates how service learning and reflection can engage students in understanding real-world concerns and cultural impacts. Melissa Stange contends that critical soft skills are as important as technical skills for students entering careers in the digital age. Matthew “Seth” Helmandollar provides an overview of Canvas tools for assisting in student success via advising and coaching.

Thank you to everyone who downloads, reads, talks about, and submits to *Inquiry*. The journal reached 30,000 total downloads in early August, and we sincerely appreciate all of your support. The *Inquiry* editorial board and I hope that you find these scholarly contributions as fascinating and thought-provoking as we do, and we encourage you to add your voice to our next issue.

We also send our best wishes for good health and safety for all of our VCCS colleagues and their families as well as all readers worldwide.
FIRST IN COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

REBECCA EVANS, DON STANSBERRY, KIM E. BULLINGTON, & DANA BURNETT

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate first-generation students’ perceptions of how their lived experiences have impacted their academic and non-academic success. We utilized focus groups consisting of first-generation students who attended a rural community college and a large, public, metropolitan, research university, and compared their lived experiences. Our findings confirmed some past research that found that a lack of social capital, academic preparation, financial resources, and family support challenge this population of students in their transition to college. However, some of our results contradict past findings which have concluded that part-time enrollment increases the risk of first-generation student attrition. Most of our findings were consistent between the two groups of participants. Findings related to awareness of the availability of support services differed between the two samples.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There is a significant gap in enrollment of first-generation students compared with peers with at least one parent who has attained a bachelor’s degree (continuing-generation students). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the rate of postsecondary attendance for the first-generation student cohort who were high school sophomores in 2002 was 24% versus 42% for continuing-generation peers (Redford, Hoyer & Ralph, 2017). First-generation students also demonstrate a higher probability of attrition than continuing-generation students (Gibson & Slate,
2010). NCES reports that for the same cohort of high school students, a lower percentage of first-generation college students than continuing generation peers had obtained a bachelor’s degree by 2012 (20 vs. 42%).

Our qualitative research, conducted in two separate studies employing an identical research design, utilized focus groups to explore the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled at a large, public, research university and a small, public, rural community college. Both institutions are located in the Southeastern United States. Guiding questions used by focus group moderators targeted those experiences which students perceived had impacted academic and non-academic college success. Findings from these two separate investigations are compared along with those in the research literature from which the above profile has been drawn. The following research questions guided these studies:

1) What are the perceptions of first-generation college students enrolled at a public, rural community college and at a large, public research university of experiences that may impact their academic success?
   a) Do the perceptions of the two groups of students differ?

2) What are the perceptions of first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college, and at a large, public research university of experiences that may impact their nonacademic success?
   a) Do the perceptions of the two groups of students differ?

3) What perceived challenges impacting their academic and non-academic success are identified by first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college and a large, public research university?

4) What personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural community college and a large, public research university perceive may
impact their college success?

(a) Do the perceptions of the two groups differ?

**FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – DEFINED**

First-generation college students are defined in many ways. For example, one of the definitions used is that neither parent has completed a college degree (Choy, 2001; Gofen, 2009; McConnell, 2000; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014). Others define the term as a situation in which one parent, but not both, graduated (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). For the purpose of this article, to qualify as first-generation, neither parent nor guardian of a participant in our study had continued their education beyond high school. We use the term “continuing-generation” to identify students with at least one parent who attended postsecondary education.

**FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – CHARACTERISTICS**

Several characteristics distinguish students who are the first in their family to attend college from their continuing-generation peers. For example, first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families, have work responsibilities (Garcia, 2010), have lower educational aspirations, and are more likely to be more financially independent than their non-first-generation peers (Bui, 2002; Davis, 2010; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). They are also more likely to encounter academic difficulty, financial hardships, and emotional challenges as compared to the experiences of their peers whose parents attended college (Housel, 2012). Students who are first in their immediate families to attend college are also more likely to come from groups of underrepresented minorities (Martin Lohfink, & Paulsen, 2005).
Many first-generation students struggle to live in two worlds (Hsiao, 1992) the world of college and the world of family responsibilities. A large percentage of this group is somewhat older than their continuing-generation peers, they live off-campus, and they may have families to support (Hodges-Payne, 2006). They are more likely not to attend college full-time and to work a high number of hours (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). First-generation students generally work more and study less than their non-first-generation peers (Bryant, 2001; Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that because first-generation students work more hours than their continuing-generation peers the likelihood of attrition increases.

First-generation students tend to lack an accurate understanding of the realities of post-secondary education, of the family income and support needed to attend college, of academic expectations for college-level study, and of what constitutes adequate college readiness (Pascarella et al., 2004). For example, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, (1996) found that first-generation students tended to lack preparation in basic math and English and had less involvement with their peers and teachers in high school. They also entered college with lower GPAs, lower standardized admission test scores, and less confidence that they will experience academic success, persist, and graduate (Jehangir, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

**FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – ROLE OF PARENTS**

Parents of first-generation students lack the social capital gained through the college experience, which is in contrast with parents of continuing-generation students who will often encourage their children to attend college and to persist once enrolled (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, Bermeo, O’Brien, & Pell Institute for the Study of
Opportunity in Higher Education, 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011). According to Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012), parents who did not attend college are generally less prepared to provide guidance, intervention, and appropriate support necessary for success in meeting the challenges of the pre-college and the college experience. For example, collectively, first-generation students tend to enroll in less selective institutions than do their peers whose parents attended college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

First-generation students are nearly four times more likely to drop out of college than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This appears to be related, at least partially, to the lack of parental college experience (Engle et al., 2006; Garcia, 2010; Gofen, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000). Some researchers have explored whether first-generation college students underperform because family norms are mismatched with those of the university culture. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) found that the independence provided by the college culture negatively impacted first-generation students’ likelihood of success. Conversely, this same study found that interdependence (being part of a community) was positively related to success.

Many parents of first-generation students may not understand the need for college (McConnell, 2000). Some may fear that their children will move away from home, may not be able to help with household responsibilities, or will undergo personal change while attending college (Gofen, 2009; McConnell, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Smith Morest (2013) found that parents of first-generation students are apprehensive about the cost of higher education and, as a result, often refrain from encouraging their children to pursue college. In particular, low-income families of first-generation students struggle to understand the benefits of any post-secondary education (McConnell, 2000; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – ENGAGEMENT

Through an analysis of the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement data (NSSE), Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley (2009) examined the relationship between “employment, engagement, and academic achievement” (p. 1) for first-generation students. They concluded that first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to participate in diverse college experiences. First-generation students also perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development. Additionally, first-generation students experienced more difficulty with their transition to college than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). These findings are consistent with much of the other research in this area.

Since many first-generation students work full-time or nearly full-time while attending college, the ability of many of these students to engage in social activities on campus is limited (D’Amico & Dika, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Lack of social connection with the college and peers results in less involvement in student organizations and extracurricular activities. This lack of social integration also results in first-time-in-college students feeling more isolated than their peers (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Conversely, the research of Fischer (2007) and Gibson and Slate (2010) confirm the strong correlation between first-year, first-generation student engagement with faculty and staff, and the motivation to persist in college.

METHODOLOGY

An examination of the literature related to first-generation students revealed that most of the studies conducted to date have used a quantitative research design. Quantitative research provides useful generalities about students' experiences, but we were interested in how first-generation students encounter their respective college
experiences. We, therefore, decided to utilize a qualitative approach through a phenomenological lens utilizing focus group interviews. According to Patton (2002), “phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (p. 482). In doing so, we considered each student experience uniquely while looking for commonalities among the participants.

The importance of context in qualitative research refers to understanding “how participants create and give meaning to social experience” (Hayes & Singh, 2012, p. 6). We used focus groups to encourage open dialog within a safe setting.

Focus group participants were drawn from a purposeful sample of first-generation sophomore and (at the university only) senior students 18 years of age or older, and enrolled either at a public, metropolitan, research institution, or a rural community college. Both institutions were located in the Southeastern United States. We did not include transfer or international students in the sample.

Prospective focus group participants were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were asked to respond to the email stating interest in the study and to provide their availability to aid in the scheduling of focus groups. Criteria used to identify students as first-generation for purposes of each of the studies was as follows:

- a) participants must be the age of 18 or older,
- b) parent may not have continued their education beyond high school,
- c) participants may not be transfer or international students.

After ensuring that the respondents met the criteria for inclusion in the study, students were invited to participate and confirm the date and time of their assigned focus group. Two days prior to the scheduled focus group, a reminder email was sent to study participants to
confirm time and location. The day before the scheduled focused group, participants were contacted by phone to remind them of the scheduled focus group meeting.

Qualitative data analysis is viewed as a cyclical process of reducing data, displaying data, drawing conclusions, and verification (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Transcripts from the focus groups were reviewed, bracketed, and coded into general meanings. The categories of general meanings were reviewed to highlight the common themes and subthemes that emerged. Following the completion of the coding process, the process of member checking ensured the themes and observations that emerged from the focus group interviews were accurate.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Sixteen males (seven sophomores, nine seniors) and 15 females (eight sophomores, seven seniors) shared their experiences in the university focus groups. Sophomore participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years; 40% of the sophomores had attained the age of 20 years old (n=6). Participants identified their ethnicity as either Black (n=6) or White (n=8). The seniors ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old and identified their ethnicity as either Black (n=7) or White (n=6).
Table 1 describes participants’ self-reported combined family income which ranged from under $10,000.00 to $50,000.00, with the majority of the participants having a combined family income of under $30,000.00. Table 2 presents the student-described occupations of their parents.

Table 1

Combined Family Income of University Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sophomores</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cumulative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; $10,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to &lt; $15,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 to &lt; $20,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to &lt; $30,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 to &lt; $40,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 to &lt; $50,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to &lt;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Parent Occupations of University Focus Group Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Sophomores</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants from the community college included a total of four males (two first-year, two second-year) and 17 females (six first-year, 11 second-year). First-year participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, and second-year participants ranged in age from 19 to 60. Participants identified their ethnicity as White \((n = 14)\), Hispanic \((n = 4)\), or Black \((n = 3)\). The marital status of first-year students included single \((n = 5)\), married \((n = 1)\), separated \((n = 1)\), and divorced \((n = 1)\). The marital status of second-year students included single \((n = 10)\) and married \((n = 3)\). Three first-year and five second-year students reported being parents. Forty-three percent of participants \((n = 9)\) were enrolled in a university transfer program. Table 3 depicts the community college focus group participants’ self-reported family income.
### Table 3

*Combined Family Income of Community College Focus Group Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>First-year</th>
<th></th>
<th>Second-year</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Cumulative</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; $10,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to &lt; $15,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 to &lt; $20,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to &lt; $30,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 to &lt; $40,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 to &lt; $50,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to &lt;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4

*Parents’ Occupations of Community College Focus Group Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>First-year</th>
<th></th>
<th>Second-Year</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Father’s Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Repair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiskilled Manual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>Skilled Manual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
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RESULTS

Through analysis and collection of focus group data, three major themes emerged:

1. What experiences focus group first-generation college students perceived impacted their academic success?
2. What non-cognitive experiences aided first-generation students through their college experience, and
3. How self-efficacy and commitment to goals aided first-generation student success.

Within each theme, sub-themes also merged which highlighted the differences in perception between the two groups of students studied, first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college, and first-generation students attending a large, public research university.

THEME ONE: PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS THAT MAY IMPACT THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Support services were noted by both samples of students as a remedy for missing social capital. However, the experiences of university students differed from what was experienced by the community college students. University focus group participants expressed that they wished they would have known more about career choices, scholarships, options of majors, and more details about the courses required for specific majors. There was a high level of frustration related to course scheduling and references were made to making the wrong class choices as they determined their program path. One student shared, “they do not tell you what you need to know and we do not know the requirements.” Many participants were unaware of the available
resources and how to access them. “Institutions tell you they have resources but they
do not tell you how to use the resources,” explained one student. Findings from other
studies have concluded that first-generation students are less likely to use student
support systems on campus (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004;
Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). These findings from previous
research were supported by the focus group participants enrolled at the university site.

Conversely, first-generation students enrolled at the community college
frequently credited the support services and resources available to them as being
reasons they have succeeded. Among the most noted services were academic
advising, financial aid, career services, and peer tutoring. Repeatedly, academic
advisors were noted to motivate first-generation students to persist. During her focus
group, a traditional-aged first-year student shared her experience with an advisor.

*She’s just such an encouragement. I go in and she builds me up and praises [sic] the accomplishment [sic] that I’ve done. I think that’s been a real encouragement when I don’t know which direction to go or what class to choose.*

She’s really great.

The positive experiences of community college participants with helpful support staff
included financial aid advisors. As finances were cited as a constant source of stress for
students, the assistance provided by the financial aid advisors helped students remain
enrolled. Both community college and four-year first-generation students expressed
significant concern both about how to pay for college and the process of applying for
financial aid. One university student said, “I didn’t know anything about the financial
aid process and how to get available scholarships.” Another student expressed a
significant level of financial concern by stating, “It is crippling when you think about
the level of debt you have.” A community college focus group participant echoed these
It was really, really overwhelming. Extremely overwhelming. Obviously, my parents were like, you should go to college, you really should, you need to go. But then they were like; we're not paying for it. You go get a job and you go pay for it yourself. That was scary when you're coming out of high school and you have a little itty-bitty paying job. You get your gas in your car and that's about it. That was kind of worrisome like I guess I'm taking one class because that's what I can afford. Until I saw the grants and the scholarships. That helped out tremendously. But yeah, man, that first semester I felt like I was in water drowning, because I had no clue what was going on, and my parents could not help because they were clueless too. They had no clue.

One second-year, community college, non-traditional student and single mother of three young children, provided multiple examples of how the financial aid advisors provided resources that helped her succeed against what she cited as great odds.

I only applied, you know, thinking I was going to get one scholarship and they gave me two. Like now I have enough money where if I need to pay somebody for some extra study time, I have that instead of trying to bribe my kids to go to bed at 6:30. I have that. She also went out of her way to tell me about, you know, resources out there that would help you, like this Early Head Start Program.

By becoming this student’s champion, the financial aid staff offered this low-income single mother the opportunity to succeed academically, reduced her stress significantly, and allowed her to earn a degree in nursing.
THEME TWO: PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS OF NON-COGNITIVE EXPERIENCES THAT RELATE TO THEIR SUCCESS

Parents and families. University students consistently mentioned parents and families as having an impact on their experience and were noted as supporters and motivators. Since 1971, the number of first-generation college students who have reported that the reason they attend college is that their parents want them to has doubled (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Ishitani (2006) reported that family support and encouragement positively impact a student’s ability to be successful during their college journey. The findings from our study support the results in the Ishitani (2006) study. A sophomore shared, “my parents have always supported me. They are blindly supporting me now. They trust me to do what’s right, but, they do not know what I am going through.”

Although the family, mostly defined as parents, was consistently identified as playing an important role for first-generation students, parents and families were often described as lacking the knowledge and understanding of the college experience. One student said, “It’s hard to do this on your own. There is no one to tell you the little secrets or loopholes.” Another student expressed, “They [parents] have no idea what I am doing, so I have to figure it out on my own.” The majority of the university participants did not seek help or advice from anyone such as a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor in dealing with the issues that arose during the application process or once enrolled. Choy (2001) concurs that first-generation students have less support concerning preparation for college from parents who did not attend college.

The participants indicated that they felt pressure as a first-generation student to make their families proud. All of the focus groups consistently had a theme of family encouragement and support as an important contributor to the college experience.
senior excitedly shared her story of going home for breaks, “whenever I go home, I tell my story and brag about everything I have learned. They don’t fully understand, but it makes them proud.” A sense of pride and accomplishment as the first in the family to graduate emerged as a reason for the students’ drive for graduation.

Although many of the participants felt a deep sense of pride in being first in the family to attend college, many of them perceived themselves as normal college students and had not thought about being a first-generation student. Their participation in the focus group process was noted as the first time for many of the participants to take the time to think about their experiences through the lens of a first-generation student. Throughout the discussions, they identified more similarities than differences with their continuing-generation peers and were challenged to identify differences in their experiences.

Contrasted with the parental support and motivation to attend and succeed in college described by students enrolled at the university, community college participants did not seem to sense the same parental enthusiasm for college attendance. This seemed to result in self-motivation as the primary ingredient to their success.

A first-year community college student discussed how his family’s non-support of his plan to earn a college degree motivated him to succeed “for me, it's a sense of pride because I'm the youngest in my family and there's nobody else that went to college.” First-generation students are proud of the fact that they are the first and are succeeding in doing something no one in their family has done before. Another second-year community college student shared,

*I think we might end up taking things less for granted than someone whose parents had gone to college and it's just the thing to do. For us, we're pushing*
ourselves over and above what the previous generations did. We realize that what we're getting, we're working for it.

Pride in being a first-generation student and a role model for other family members motivated one second-year community college student to complete her degree “I have a little cousin. When we all get together, my little cousin who's 22, and is now talking about going to college is like, 'I'm going to beat you in college.' ” While another first-year student also found she had become a role model for her sister which had motivated her. She states “she's seen me doing it and now she's like, I don't see how you do it with three kids. If you can do it with three kids, I know that I can do it.”

Repeatedly, students shared that although some family members did not support the students’ pursuit of a college education, the family was a driving force for the majority of study participants.

**Self-efficacy.** Many university participants described themselves as having a high sense of independence and self-motivation. Participants were used to the challenges of being self-sufficient, working, and balancing school with other commitments. They explained how their success depended on their abilities and how they held themselves accountable for their actions. Participants also explained that they encouraged themselves to be successful and were self-driven to attend college and complete a degree. Overall, they defined themselves as achievers. They acknowledged the barriers (social, economic, or cultural) that they faced getting into and navigating college. “We should be proud of where we are. Others are not here. Just being here makes us successful,” shared one participant.

In the community college focus groups, we heard the same theme. Community college students spoke about determination, commitment to goals, stubbornness, and having a strong work ethic. For example, a second-year student
shared how she struggled to find a new balance in her life after separating from her husband and changing jobs while attending college. She comments that

For me, it's a bit of stubbornness. I've been tempted to give up, especially this semester with everything in my personal life really upside down. I'm like, no, I've come too far, I've worked too hard, I've done too much to give up now. I can't quit now.

This student’s demonstration of self-efficacy and determination confirms previous research that determination and self-efficacy are important ingredients for every students’ success. In many casesm these traits may be even more essential (Martin, 2002; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Academic resiliency is essential for motivation to succeed even when confronted with challenges and stress (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014).

A second-year community college student shared how he had to learn everything himself. After leaving college for a year and a half he returned when he felt more focused and in the right “head space”. He credits his experiences learning the “system” to building his self-confidence. The student shared

I kind of have to educate myself as I go about learning how all this works, how degrees work, how credits and all this stuff, this whole bureaucracy works. In terms of money, trying to find financial aid and things like that. I'm having to teach myself, find it myself because my parents really can't.

Another second-year community college student shared how her struggle to start college allowed her to be more self-assured as a student. She shared how her experiences created a sense of pride in her accomplishments.

I think it is because you come in not knowing, you come in blind. And you have no clue how to pay for it, you have no clue what you're going to do. You have no
clue what classes are going to be like. But then you succeed and you get to where you need to be and you turn around and then you go, I did that.

Several community college students noted that managing their time helped them to succeed in their courses. Many focus group participants were parents juggling not only work and school, but also children and family responsibilities. They agreed that putting things off could result in failing their courses. One student shared her need for a routine in her life.

Getting a schedule going has been really helpful. You could always not do it, but I'm the type of person that's just like, "I've got to get my stuff done." So it does help me.

Self-efficacy, the ability to be self-sufficient, and balancing school with other commitments proved to be essential for first-generation student success. These students confirmed that their success was dependent on their ability to hold themselves accountable for their actions.

**THEME THREE: COMMITMENT TO GOALS, STUBBORNNESS AND THE ABILITY TO PERSIST EVEN WHEN CHALLENGED WITH PERSONAL CONFLICTS RESULT IN FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS**

**Involvement.** Many university participants were involved in activities outside of the classroom including volunteering, playing football, participating in fraternities, clubs/organizations, club sports, and partying and just relaxing. One participant shared “I am paying for it so I want to take advantage of everything. I live my life.” Another participant shared, “life outside of work and school is boring unless you get involved.” Several of the university focus group participants agreed “finding clubs to join is very easy.” Campus involvement and social networking/“connectivity” were a great means for some and led to jobs and social opportunities on and off campus. A senior participant
identified his biggest regret about his experience was related to his involvement, “my biggest regret is not getting fully involved.” Students repeatedly agreed that involvement in groups and activities outside of the classroom helped them feel that they belonged in college.

Not all community college focus group participants found the time to participate in on-campus activities, or student clubs and organizations. But those who did cite the benefit of building relationships with their peers as helping them to feel college was the right place to be. Other studies have described social integration as important to the success of first-year college students (Kuh et al., 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Whitt, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). By connecting students to the college through peer interaction and participation in student organizations, students begin to see their place in college as the correct place for them (Terenzini et al., 1996).

One second-year community college student shared how her involvement in a student organization had helped her gain confidence and to integrate into the campus environment.

*I've done so much through that group it really helped me grow as a person. When I first came here I feel like I was very different than I am today.*

Not only did her involvement in a student organization result in her bonding with her peers and feeling more comfortable, but she also shared how involvement resulted in new skills development.

*I think they helped me in many different ways. I actually helped organize one of the events on campus last year. That was a totally new experience for me. It turned out really great and it gave me more confidence in myself.*

Another student shared how playing on the soccer team was one of his most memorable experiences in college. While this student struggled to maintain a passing
GPA, he found motivation and support through his involvement in this student organization.

_They've done quite a wonderful job. Most of us don't really have model figures it somewhat helps with school because the next day you want to come back._

Student clubs and organizations were not the only conduits for students to build relationships with their peers. Several students noted how peer study groups helped them to succeed in their classes and build bonds with their classmates. One community college student, noted that when taking a class over the summer the number of students in the class was small. Although that class had a small number of students enrolled, they shared experiences, which resulted in friendships that extended after the end of the course.

_It was a smaller class. We just had the best time together, and we still keep in touch with each other._

Another first-year student shared how study groups not only help community college students build relationships but also helped her to learn different study skills.

_I just had my A&P study group. It was nice because it was a group of students and when we were, you know, conversing about everything it was interesting to see how they remembered things compared to me._

Repeatedly, first-generation students referenced the opportunity to discuss class material and study with their peers as a tool for success. A community college student majoring in Veterinarian Technology shared how a program-specific study lab aided in her success.

_We have a study lab strictly for the Veterinarian Technology program. A lot of us will go in there and study together or do projects, kind of talk through different things that we're having trouble with._
General agreement was heard across all of the focus groups of how a strong sense of self-efficacy, pride in being the first to attend college, and relationships with peers aid first-generation students succeed in higher education.

**Financial issues.** Both community college and four-year first-generation students expressed significant concern both about how to pay for college and the process of applying for financial aid. One university student said, “I didn’t know anything about the financial aid process and how to get available scholarships.” Another student expressed a significant level of financial concern by stating, “It is crippling when you think about the level of debt you have.”

A community college focus group participant echoed these same worrisome concerns.

*It was really, really overwhelming. Extremely overwhelming. Obviously, my parents were like, you should go to college, you really should, you need to go. But then they were like; we're not paying for it. You go get a job and you go pay for it yourself. That was kind of worrisome like I guess I'm taking one class because that's what I can afford until I saw the grants and the scholarships. That helped out tremendously.*

**Implications and Conclusions**

Findings gleaned from our study confirm past research. First-generation students, no matter what the size or type of their institution, reported that lack of social capital was the greatest challenge and risk to student retention. It is interesting to note that although study participants in each of the two studies shared many of the same experiences, there were some differences. These differences include the following:
• Community college students felt the size and type of institution were a good fit for their academic pursuits.

• The study completed at the larger urban university found students reporting that they struggled to locate the resources designed to provide help including support services.

• Social integration was noted by both student samples as being important to their academic success, however, the community college students were less likely than the university first-generation students to engage in student organizations and clubs. Social integration for these students was found mainly in the form of study groups and peer-to-peer networking.

• Determination and self-motivation were characteristics that our participants self-reported as important to their success.

Our research, which investigated the experiences of first-generation community college and university students, confirmed the need to create clear pathways into and throughout the college experience for all first-generation students.

The current study’s findings confirm past research that specialized first-generation orientation programs are needed to fill the social capital gap (Tsai, 2012). We also suggest specialized programs for families of first-generation students, as well as academic and financial advising designed for the needs of first-generation students for all campuses. Marketing these tailored services to the first-generation student will help to fill the void of lack of social capital and parental involvement for this growing population of college students. Implementation of these specialized services and support resources should be monitored and assessed to determine whether these tools increase first-generation student retention and completion.

First-generation students are an important growing population of students
on college campuses. Additional research should focus on an assessment of support services designed to aid student success and longitudinal, cohort-based research. Research which will be especially valuable for continuing this preliminary look at the experiences of first-generation students in college
REFERENCES


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REDUCING STEREOTYPE THREAT IN THE CLASSROOM

TODD K. PLATTS & KIM HOOSIER

ABSTRACT

This brief pedagogical essay, focusing on social science classrooms, provides fellow instructors with practical strategies and advice in reducing the presence of stereotype threat in their classrooms. Techniques of task reframing, practices of positive affirmation, the providing of constructive criticism, the incorporation of marginalized groups into course content, and suggestions for meeting stereotype threat head-on are discussed as are some strategies students can adopt themselves. While the methods of stereotype threat reduction addressed in this essay can help curtail some of the negative impacts of racism’s micro-level forces, stereotype threat must also be considered a structural problem that requires structural solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Academic underperformance among racial and ethnic minorities remains a well-documented and stubborn feature of American higher education (Zirkel, 2008; Harris, 2010; Merolla & Jackson, 2019). The issue is of particular relevance for community colleges as 52% of Hispanic and 42% of African American undergraduates are students at two-year institutions (Community College Research Center, n.d.). As well, graduation rates at two-year colleges lag behind those of four-year institutions, particularly for minority student populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). While structural factors such as racialized economic inequality and poor prior schooling significantly contribute to this trend, and, therefore, cannot be minimized in the fight for racial justice (Zirkel, 2008; Hughey, 2015; Kozol, 2012; Merolla & Jackson, 2019), this brief pedagogical essay focuses on another contributing factor to minority
underperformance in colleges and universities: professors’ unwitting (re)production of racism’s micro-level processes, specifically the phenomenon of stereotype threat. Throughout the following paragraphs, various strategies of stereotype threat reduction are discussed – strategies that when combined can reduce the racial achievement in students. Before discussing these strategies, however, the stage will be set by briefly explaining the concept of stereotype threat for those unfamiliar with it.

Stereotype threat has been defined as, “a situational predicament in which individuals are at risk, by dint of their actions or behaviors, of confirming negative stereotypes about their group” (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011, p. 5). Analogous definitions include a “situation in which there is a negative stereotype about a person’s group, and he or she is concerned about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of this stereotype” (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016, p. 416); “a concern that one might inadvertently confirm an unwanted belief about one’s group” (Schmader & Beilock, 2011, p. 35); “the apprehension targets feel when negative stereotypes about their group could be used as a lens through which to judge their behaviors” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011, p. 227); and “the state of psychological discomfort people experience when confronted by an unflattering group or individual reputation in a situation where that reputation can be confirmed by one’s behavior” (McGlone and Pfiester, 2007, p. 175). In other words, a stereotype threat occurs when individuals are placed in situations where a negative stereotype can be applied to some aspect of their identity (e.g. race/ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality, age).

Stereotype threat inaugurates additional operational concerns that distract from the task at hand (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011). When a stereotype threat is made salient, it often induces counterproductive senses of unease in individuals, which, in turn, causes those individuals to underperform in specific tasks. The predicament of stereotype threat means “that anything one
does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one’s own eyes” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797), thereby resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy (McGlone & Pfiester, 2007).

Studies have shown that anyone has the potential to fall prey to stereotype threat, even members of otherwise privileged groups. Caucasian males, for example, underperform in tests purporting to measure “natural athletic ability” as Caucasians are stereotyped as less athletic than African Americans in the United States (Stone et al., 1999; McGlone & Pfiester, 2007; Stone, Chalabaev, & Harrison, 2011). One need not personally believe in a stereotype, they only need to be aware of it for it to have an impact (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Most research examples, however, document how marginalized groups are negatively impacted by stereotype threat such as African Americans, Latinx, and the poor in standardized testing, women in high stakes math and science assessments, and the elderly in memory, to name a few (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011). These examples confirm that stereotype threat is a pervasive phenomenon that has been well-replicated across different groups performing different tasks (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011).

Whereas any person of any background can be subject to stereotype threat, racial and ethnic minorities face negative stereotypes of greater consequence (Garfield, 2007; Logel, Peach, & Spencer, 2011). Crucial for this essay, are the stereotypes that minorities possess inferior intellect and/or are deficient in academic ability – stereotypes we contend many well-meaning instructors inadvertently fuel (Zirkel, 2008; Merolla & Jackson, 2019) and stereotypes that a nontrivial portion of Caucasians still believe (Hughey, 2015).

Anti-minority stereotypes in academic settings manifest in several ways. Placement and standardized tests, often likened to displays of intellectualism, place minorities at risk of “confirming their lack of intelligence,” for instance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 2010,
Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Here, unfortunately, African Americans and Latinxs lag behind Caucasian students in standardized metrics for reading and mathematics, regardless of age level (Zirkle, 2008; Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011; Murphy and Taylor, 2011; Merolla & Jackson, 2019). Similarly, writing analytic assignments or term papers, tasks strongly associated academic ability, place minorities at risk of “confirming their poor intellectual skills” (Steele, 2010). Certainly we, as instructors, want to intellectually challenge students and push them out of their comfort zones, but unless we are mindful of looming stereotype threats, we can accidentally perpetuate the racial achievement gap. Accordingly, the crux of this essay is to suggest that we need to be careful in what we say and do and how we say and do things in and out of our classrooms. Failure to do so can contribute to an environment that is more “emotionally exhausting,” “cognitively taxing,” and alienating than the high-pressure world of higher education already is (Zirkel, 2008).

With these facts in mind, the strategies discussed below, synthesized from extant literature and applied to social science classes, have been shown to be beneficial in closing the performance deficit between minority and non-minority students without altering instructional content or expectations. The strategies are not wholly of the authors’ doing; many are corroborated in academic literature – although they have been tailored to dovetail into teaching social science courses. Before proceeding it is important to mention that, while this essay is aimed at community college instructors, the techniques have been tested in a variety of academic settings, and, therefore, can be effective employed by instructors from any academic institution.

**Task Reframing**

One of the most effective ways to blunt the influence of stereotype threat is to reframe tasks to obfuscate the presence of such threat (Alter et al., 2010; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). One way to accomplish this is to explain tests, whether multiple-choice, short answer, and/or essay-
based, as designed to reward preparation. Tests should not be described as having anything to do with intelligence, they are all about the work students put into them and are designed to measure “current knowledge or school-based performance rather than overall aptitude or individual skill” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang 2011, pp. 245–246). With tests no longer understood as intelligence metrics, their ability to exercise stereotype threat over minority students is diminished.

Similarly, writing, particularly academic writing, should be explained as being comprised of smaller steps, achievable through goal setting and planning. While it is admittedly difficult to get students to follow this advice, effective paper writing is no longer seen as the byproduct of strong intellectual skills. Writing is something that can be accomplished through hard work and dedication toward the development of critical thinking skills. Also, explaining academic tasks as challenges rather than assessments of intellectual ability provides a means to buffer the negative consequences of stereotype threats related to academic performance (Alter, 2010).

Another useful technique that helps to reduce stereotype threat in the classroom is to reverse the typical grading structure for assignments. Specifically, incorporating an anonymous grading system where instructors do not know which students’ exams and/or papers they are grading can result in minimizing stereotype threat (Wilson, 2017). This system should be set up at the beginning of the semester. On all assignments that are turned in for a grade, the student uses a chosen number or selected codename rather than their name. Before students sign up for a number or codename it should be explained the class has high expectations for all students and that through hard work and dedication any student can be successful. It is important for instructors to assess student work on its quality. Introduced in this way, an anonymous grading system assures students that instructors are not trying to reduce them to a simple number; rather, instructors are trying to ensure fairness to all (Wilson, 2017; White, Mentag, & Kaunda, 2020). The anonymity maintained
by the system corresponds to the finding that minority students perform worse on standardized tests when asked to identify their racial status before the exam (Alter et al., 2010). As well, people desire reassurance that their social identity will not restrict their opportunities and the anonymous grading system supplies a cue that stigmatized individuals will have a fair chance (Murphy & Taylor, 2011).

The anonymous grading system further alleviates any hidden biases that instructors may not realize they have. It ensures the grading on all papers and exams will be done with the “same set of eyes.” In addition, it provides a sense of comfort and security to students knowing they are just being graded on the quality of their work. This specifically helps to reduce stereotype threat in that it reframes the assessment of work to reinforce the idea that not only are assessments fair but that the grading system is also anonymous and fair. When situations can be restructured to ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to achieve success, the chance of stereotype threat is therefore reduced. The system, thus, corresponds with the suggestion to refrain from asking students to identify their sex or race on high stakes tests (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011).

**POSITIVE AFFIRMATION**

Many marginalized and disadvantaged students readily identify as hard working and dedicated individuals. Taking advantage of these positive identities can lead to another powerful stereotype threat reduction technique (Schmader & Beilock, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Namely, research suggests that emphasizing students’ positive attributes (e.g., disciplined, hard-working, insightful, creative) and encouraging self-affirmation among all students enhances motivation (Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006). Related to the notion of “hard-working,” numerous studies have documented that racial minorities are more likely to enter higher
education (Merolla & Jackson, 2019) and more likely to attend class, after controlling for class background (Blake, 2018). This can be harnessed positively as value-affirmations can foster feelings of connectedness and belongingness (Walton & Carr, 2011) and can bolster performance (McGlone & Aronson, 2007).

As well, as the semester progresses, assignments can be contextualized with the notion that students have proven themselves capable of producing quality work. Simple as it may seem, reminding college students that they are college students spotlights an aspect of their identity that is not aligned with underperformance (McGlone & Aronson, 2007). It can, therefore, mitigate stereotype threat (Schimel et al., 2004; Zirkel, 2008). Relatedly, instructors can affirm the strong points of students and have students affirm those points as well, which can be done by asking them directly during office meetings or in class. The building of confidence in these simple exercises can be an effective balm against stereotype threat (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; Schmader & Beilock, 2011). Taken together, these practices diminish the salience of stereotype threat while also augmenting attributes linked to performance and success.

**CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

Efforts at reducing stereotype threat need not take on the veneer of coddling. Constructive, critical, and thoughtful feedback when combined with the assurance that students can meet high academic standards, research suggests, improves student performance and hamstrings stereotype threat because “belonging” is tacitly assumed, not questioned (Zirkel, 2008). Focusing solely on negative feedback (e.g., only on what a student got wrong) can implicitly reinforce notions that marginalized (and struggling) students do not belong in college. Hence, in practice, it is important to critically comment on students’ individual tests and papers. However, it is equally important to explain how students can build upon otherwise astute observations, how they can ask different
questions, or how they can reframe their topic to be more conducive to the material at hand. Importantly, instructors must make sure to accentuate the positives in student writing as they grade. In addition to individual comments on students’ papers, problems can be addressed collectively. Specifically, instructors can make a list of general problems (e.g., missing or underdeveloped thesis statements, lack disciplinary engagement of an issue, reliance on anecdotal evidence, etc.) and discuss them with the class, asking students how they can improve on their work. This can also be done with tests. Individual troubles are marked on the tests, and generic issues are taken up in class. Students must know how they are capable of improving their performance. Simple exercises like taking sample short-answer or essay test questions and asking students to construct an answer worthy of full credit can produce surprising results. Whether covering a written assignment or a test, instructors need to take care to never attach problems with specific students. Doing so builds a critical, yet welcoming, learning environment for all students (Zirkel, 2008).

**Positive Exemplars**

Providing exemplars from marginalized social groups and demonstrating how a student’s own identity can be reflected in the course can also help curtail stereotype threat by reminding marginalized groups of successful individuals in their group (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). It is also important to note that stigmatized individuals look for cues of belonging, with a sense of belonging being especially important for groups who may be seen as unsuitable in certain settings (Murphy & Taylor, 2011; Walton & Carr, 2011). Unfortunately, undergraduate textbooks paint a conservative picture of most discipline at odds with recent research and developments in the field (cf. Manza, Sauder, & Wright 2007). This entails the continual annexation of early disciplinary contributions from women and racial minorities (Wright II, 2008). Stereotype threat scholars suggest instructors
should “assign biographical readings about female scientists, mathematicians, and engineers and to discuss current events which showcase achievements of women in math and science” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011).

In the social science, the predominance of Caucasian males in disciplinary histories can be explained by the fact that many early thinkers from the social sciences were products of the Enlightenment – a bourgeois, racist, masculinist, and Eurocentric movement that elided the thoughts and ideas of Othered groups (cf. Salerno, 2004). With that being said, social science histories must be rewritten to provide students with a more critical understanding of each discipline’s past. As potential remedy for sociology, for instance, the “Atlanta School” of sociology, headed by W.E.B. DuBois, can be discussed as being on par with the famed “Chicago School” of the same period (Wright II, 2012). As well, incorporating the thoughts and ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells into early examples of sociological thought in the United States may also prove beneficial. Introducing luminaries from underrepresented groups is important because numerical imbalances of student composition can trigger a stereotype threat (Schmader & Beilock, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016), and cause such individuals to feel devalued, excluded, and unfairly treated (Derks, Inzlicht, & Kang, 2008). In other words, when women are significantly underrepresented in math classes or minority students are underrepresented on campus, this can invoke feelings of stereotype threat. Including scholars from marginalized backgrounds inches a class toward what some stereotype threat scholars call “critical mass” or “the number of identity mates that it takes for individuals to feel they will not be judged according to their social identity” (Murphy & Taylor, 2011, p. 27). Of course, there is a broader point of hiring a more diverse faculty and staff to be made here (Zirkel, 2008). In order for positive exemplars to be effective, research indicates they must be understood as competent, they must be
perceived as belonging to a negatively stereotyped in-group, and individuals must be able to locate how the exemplar defies a negatively stereotyped domain (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009).

To follow up on stressing the importance of identity inclusion, incorporating a small introductory writing assignment where students spend a few minutes writing about themselves can be beneficial. In such an assignment, students can describe who they are as a person, how they would describe themselves to a stranger, what is important to them, and how their past experiences have shaped their identity today. Cohen’s et al. (2006), for instance, describe an assignment that asks students to identify values that are important to them and for students to write a brief essay explaining why they considered the values important. Generally, assignments of this vein can provide a lead-in to discuss a variety of topics, theories, and concepts germane to social science courses. It also provides a wonderful way to get to know the students in courses early in the semester.

**MEETING STEREOTYPE THREAT HEAD-ON**

Many students have never heard of the notion of stereotype threat even if they may have experienced it in the past. Therefore, it is very helpful to talk about it and approach the issue from a straightforward perspective early in the semester (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; McGlone & Pfiester, 2007). In the social sciences, this can all be done in the first couple days of class when instructors go over the syllabus and discuss the content and expectations of the semester. It is also important to emphasize that often stereotype threat is a subtle ongoing process that could happen beyond their recognition and they may not attribute test stress or anxiety to this issue. However, this does not mean that the stereotype threat is not impacting their performance and ultimate success. It is very important to reinforce the notion that the class has high academic standards, acknowledging that each student can achieve success through hard work and putting in the needed
study time. The tone and expectations of the class should be clearly articulated at the beginning of the semester so that students feel that the environment is one that will measure their time and dedication to the course.

Acknowledging and meeting stereotype threat head-on is an effective tactic in lessening its impact (Johns, Scmader, & Martens, 2005; McGlone & Aronson, 2007; McGlone & Pfiester, 2007). This simple technique allows students in stereotyped domains attribute negative sentiment to an external social force (Johns, Scmader, & Martens, 2005; McGlone & Aronson, 2007). Moreover, students knowing about stereotype threat can help students reappraise feelings of unease and doubt more positively to mitigate its influence (Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008). It is, therefore, imperative for instructors to find a way to introduce a full discussion of stereotype threat early in their courses, altering the sequencing of material if necessary. In social science classes, stereotype threat can be mentioned on the first day of class during our explanation of the aims and scope of the course. Students can be informed that social scientists have been able to demonstrate the impact of stereotypes on individual performance, and that stereotype threat has been known to negatively impact the test performances of racial minorities and the test performances of women in mathematics among other findings. Students can also be told that if they feel anxious while taking a test or performing an academic task, this anxiety is likely the result of stereotype threat – a well-known social phenomenon – and has nothing to do with their actual academic ability. This is a prime example of how social forces influence human beings – one of the major lessons to be learned in any social science. It is also important to teach about the illegitimacy of stereotypes and encourage students to view intelligence as flexible rather than intractable (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016).
EMPOWERING STUDENTS

In addition to steps instructors can take, there are also ways to empower students. One way is to encourage them to work in groups. Too often, students think of college success as a solitary journey made with the help of no one. With this mindset, students can experience struggles and setbacks as their own personal issues. Asking for help or working with others is seen as a sign of weakness. This is what Uri Treisman (1992) famously found in his study of why some groups of students succeed in calculus and other groups do not. More specifically, Treisman discovered that students who studied in small groups thrived because they got less bogged in individual problems and could spend more time engaging in higher-order thinking. Students who studied alone spent considerable time on individual problems, repeating them over and over, and almost never dedicated time to the higher-order thinking necessary for success. Accordingly, students should be encouraged to form study groups and to join student clubs around identity groups such as Adult Student Life Club, the Black Student Alliance, LGBT Club, and Student Veterans of America to name a few.

Students can be further armed against stereotype threat by being taught and encouraged to adopt a growth mindset where intelligence is seen malleable and academic skills such as notetaking, test taking, writing, studying, and reading are also seen as skills that are learned and honed with practice (Dweck, 2007). Here, students should be encouraged to view their progression through school by how much they are improving their skills and knowledge, not how smart they are. In addition to promoting a growth mindset, students must know that struggle and feelings of not belonging can be part of the learning process. Experiencing these emotions is normal and not aberrant (Walton & Carr, 2011). Significantly, students must also be informed that these kinds of
feelings are transient and can be ameliorated by confiding in a strong support group or an understanding instructor or college staff member.

CONCLUSION

These are not the only strategies that can be used to combat the influence of stereotype threat in the classroom, but ones that have been shown useful in literature. Although borrowing from prior research, this essay consolidated numerous studies into a brief list of practical advice for fellow educators. It is also hoped that this essay brought a broader awareness to the (re)production of stereotype threat in the classroom. Though this essay addressed stereotype threat in the classroom, it must be noted that stereotype threat stretches beyond the classroom on college campuses. Before many students even enter a class, they are subjected to stereotype threat piquing placement testing. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address this important issue, but it must be part of a broader conversation to bring racial equity to education.

It is also important to note that addressing stereotype threat is not a solution to the structural and institutional racism and classism that exists in the United States. Far too many students face poor prior schooling and racialized inequality before they appear in college classrooms. These issues require structural fixes, not interpersonal ones. Unless they are addressed as institutional problems, a smattering of individual efforts will inevitably fall short. Be that as it may, addressing stereotype threat is a small, but not insignificant, needed step to redress the achievement gap in higher education.
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TEACHING THE SYLLABUS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

YUEMIN HE, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

Reacting directly to the fact that even the best syllabus is worthless to the student who does not read it, this essay draws inspiration from research of the past decade, especially from the learning-focused syllabus concept that was introduced by three researchers at the University of Virginia, and uses a questionnaire to gauge our community college students’ needs. It suggests specific methods to build the bridge between course content instruction and syllabus teaching. Ultimately, it contributes to the discussion of several important syllabus-related questions: How can instructors use the syllabus as a pedagogical tool to build a strong student rapport? How can instructors balance the syllabus to build a positive academic atmosphere and fulfill course requirements? What are the ways to make the syllabus exemplary for student learning? What standard practices can be established in college syllabus education? The essay aims to increase student autonomy and community and student success, which is the goal of community college education.

INTRODUCTION

As community college instructors, we have some routine practices regarding the syllabus: Before a semester unfolds, we spend days crafting the assignments, updating the schedules, and tweaking our policies. We post the document in our Learning Management Systems and distribute hard copies on the first day of class. Some call the first day of class the syllabus day because of the time and effort dedicated to getting students to read and absorb the vital information included.
We use quizzes, games, group discussions, etc., to ensure that the document is read and remembered all semester long, and yet, how many times do we repeat what is in the syllabus? Students ask where to find us outside of class, when our office hours are, when assignments are due, and sometimes in the division offices, we have even overheard them asking what our names are. Despite the great importance we put on the syllabus, and our efforts to make it accessible and memorable, it is often neglected or undervalued.

It is no wonder scholars have conducted vigorous studies, striving to make the syllabus and its use more efficacious. In their article “Syllabus Detail and Students' Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness,” Bryan K. Saville and his co-authors (2010) asserted that a very detailed syllabus may generate more positive responses from the students (p. 188). When writing about student plagiarism, Sara Staats and Julie M. Hupp (2012) reported in “An Examination of Academic Misconduct Intentions and the Ineffectiveness of Syllabus Statements” that the syllabus as a statement itself, even if cognitively processed, is not a deterrent to student malpractice. They called for more innovative approaches to enhance the effectiveness of the statement in curtailing dishonesty (p. 244). While emphasizing close attention to details in syllabus construction, Jade S. Jenkins and her co-authors (2014) suggested in “More Content or More Policy? A Closer Look at Syllabus Detail, Instructor Gender, and Perceptions of Instructor Effectiveness” that gender differences of the instructors do not affect the effectiveness of restrictive boundary details (i.e., restrictive policies and expectations) in the syllabus; instead, it is the way the information is presented rather than the information itself that is relevant to students’ perceived instructor support and effectiveness (p. 133). Later Claudia Stanny (2015), the director of the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment of the University of West Florida, published “Assessing the Culture of Teaching and Learning through a Syllabus Review” to advocate aligning the syllabus
construction and teaching with the 21st century skills of both the instructors and students (i.e., aligning institutional syllabus review measures with activities and assignments designed to cultivate student skills in information literacy and digital communication). When it comes to the syllabus, “a few compulsive sorts may pore over every letter. Others may refer to it only when there is a problem. Many may never look at it at all” (p. 37). Therefore, Mark Canada (2013) prompted his fellow instructors in his essay, “The Syllabus: A Place to Engage Students' Egos,” to put themselves in their students’ shoes, and ask the question that their students would ask about the syllabus: “what’s in it for me?” (p. 42).

These studies provide instructors with valuable tools to employ and paradigms to rethink our practices in teaching and using the syllabus. In 2016, University of Virginia (hereafter UVA) researchers--Michael S. Palmer, Lindsay B. Wheeler, and Itiya Aneece--transformed that question into a more provocative one: Does the syllabus matter? In their article, “Does the Document Matter: The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education,” they answered that question with a qualified “yes” and promoted what they call the learning-focused syllabus. They pointed out that the traditional content-based syllabus has become increasingly authoritative and rule-infested; it stifles student motivation and hinders student learning. In contrast, the learning-focused syllabus is characterized by “question-driven course descriptions,” “long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals,” clear and measurable learning objectives, detailed course schedules, and an approachable and inviting tone (p. 36). In other words, the learning-focused syllabus is student-centered and designed to engage students actively with the document and the course.

After surveying 100 students on their perceptions of a traditional syllabus and a learning-focused syllabus for the same course, the three researchers concluded that both types of syllabi were useful to students but the learning-focused syllabus created more positive perceptions of the
syllabus itself, the course and the instructor. They reported that the UVA students in the study “viewed the learning-focused syllabus as a useful, organizing document, the course as an interesting, relevant, and rigorous learning experience, and the instructor as a caring and supportive individual integral to the learning process” (p. 46). Since student engagement impacts retention and student success, I wanted to figure out if the learning-focused syllabus had the same positive impacts on the very diverse, frequently multi-lingual learners in my community college classrooms.

Our students come from over 180 different countries; 60 percent of this student body is ethnic or racial minorities. Many come from countries where syllabi are literally non-existent. I taught more than a decade in a college in China without seeing a Western syllabus; some sort of teaching plan was routinely used by the instructors, but it was never given to the students, nor was the plan a full-fledged and systematically developed syllabus. Just last year, I met two Chinese graduate students at an international conference in Indonesia. When speaking of syllabus, the students reported that their professor, who had returned from Ph.D. study in the United States, was just in the process of distributing to the class a document that bore resemblance to the American syllabus.

To do this, I collaborated with Dean Jen Daniels and developed a questionnaire that asked questions in the spirit of the above research. Ultimately, we wanted to increase student engagement and find specific ways to educate our students about the usefulness of the syllabus and the connection between syllabus teaching and our daily course content instruction.

**Using a Questionnaire to Identify Community College Students’ Needs**

Titled “Syllabus for You,” the questionnaire (see Appendix D) includes nine multiple answer questions: The first five questions gather information on student use of the syllabus and their knowledge of common syllabus conventions. The final four questions ask students to review
sample policies following traditional syllabus conventions (third-person, boilerplate policies) versus the learning-focused ones. In other words, the questionnaire examines how much respondents know about the syllabus, where their challenges lie in understanding the syllabus, what common practices they adopt in terms of syllabus use, etc. It leads to answers that can help gauge receptiveness to the characteristics of a learning-focused syllabus as well.

We conducted two rounds of the questionnaire within the English Department at Northern Virginia Community College (hereafter NOVA), Annandale Campus: first with 180 students from ENF 3-ENG 111 (Preparing for College English III & College Composition I) and ENG 111 (College Composition I) classes in fall 2018, and then with 241 students from ENF 3-ENG 111 and ENG 111 classes in spring 2019. A total of 421 students participated in the survey, and both rounds ended up with more than a 50 percent student response rate. Both ENF 3 and ENG 111 were selected because they are gateway courses in which most students enroll; their success in college is often predicated on performance in gateway courses like ENF 3 and ENG 111. Below is a brief analysis of the student responses.

**Question 1:** For the question “When did you first understand what a syllabus was,” at least twice the number of students in ENF 3-ENG 111 than in ENG 111 answered “After I came to NOVA (or another college).” ENF 3-ENG 111 students were more likely to have been introduced to the concept of the syllabus in college rather than in high school or earlier. The survey result thus points to the need for instructors to adopt different strategies in using the aforementioned Syllabus Day: In teaching students in the first-semester, gateway courses in all disciplines, we need to be more explicit about the use and importance of the syllabus. For that purpose, systematic syllabus training activities, such as the one introduced later in this essay, may be adopted. Whereas, we can refresh and reinforce the knowledge that our more prepared students have about the syllabus by “flipping
the classroom,” such as arranging diagnostic assessment activities creatively. Appendix B is an example of such activities, and I will discuss the example in detail.

**Question 2:** More than 20 percent of students from each group believed “the syllabus is important ONLY at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.” Nearly 80 percent of students from each group responded that “the syllabus is important every day because it contains information about due dates, attendance policies, office hours, and I can find information I need without having to ask the instructor.” This is good news for those of us who sometimes despair that no one reads the syllabus. The question becomes how to reach the 20% who do not understand the holistic functions of the syllabus. One solution I suggest is to teach the syllabus itself as a work model, which will make it necessary for our students to pore over the whole document early in the semester, assess its long-term functions, and integrate the document into their daily learning habits. In the last part of this essay I will offer one concrete example while discussing this model approach.

**Question 3:** More than 10 percent of the students from both groups could not read the office hours provided. The results from the two rounds of research echoed each other. Slightly more (some 3 percent) ENF 3-ENG 111 students than ENG 111 students could not read the office hours by appointment correctly. The results from the two rounds of survey concurred as well. Our takeaway is that what instructors consider to be clear as day may not be that clear to the students at all. Community college faculty play an important role in helping first-generation and other new-to-college students decode the academic jargon and abbreviations in which we are immersed. The students who often solicit confirmation from us may just need some education about what the different types of office hours are, what they entail, and what the commonly used abbreviations in the syllabus are (ex. R = Thursday).
**Question 4:** To the question, “How do you feel if your class syllabus states ‘Office Hours: Before and After Class’,” slightly more than 10 percent of the students from each group considered “the office hours not written in a student-friendly manner” while at least a quarter of the students from both groups felt “the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.” It seems that more students trusted that the professor was well-intentioned than believed that the professor failed to write the syllabus in a student-friendly manner. The statement sounds friendly; however, the underlying ambiguity in the statement can lead to confusion (ex. How early before class? How long after?).

**Question 5:** While more than 70 percent of the students knew the importance of reading both the Course Description and Course Objectives in a syllabus, neither group of the students seemed to perceive the connections between the two sections, let alone see much value in thinking much about either section. Apparently instructors need to illuminate the students about the necessity for, and purposes of, these two sections, individually and in conjunction with each other. The students’ lack of understanding of the interconnection between different sections of the syllabus also behooves us instructors to be creative in writing course syllabus. For example, the UVA researchers advocated the “question-driven course descriptions,” which Ben Kain (2004), author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, dubbed as “beautiful questions.” This type of descriptions emphasizes framing the course content as questions to be explored and answered by students (p. 37). They are inviting, treating the students as fellow scholars or engaged competent learners. For example, in my ENG 125 (Introduction to Literature) syllabus, instead of a traditional course description, I borrowed some ideas from *The Hatred of Literature*, a book by William Marx (20015/2018), and wrote:

Book writer William Marx says that literature does not start with Homer or *Gilgamesh*, but with Plato driving the poets out of the city, like God casting Adam and Eve out of Paradise.
That is literature’s genesis (p. 24). Literature survived and has been thriving. Why literature has the power to defy all the anti-literary discourses? Why without literature human life saps? What is literature anyways? This course introduces a range of literary genres to help contemplate these questions as it continues to develop our college writing ability.

**Question 6:** To the question “Which statement or statements on attendance do you prefer,” the questionnaire lists four choices, two of which are

a) If you are ill or can’t make it, let me know, ahead of time if possible, or by email, so that I can mark you as excused. But bear in mind that an excused absence still counts as an absence. Even though I post your assignments on Blackboard, there is no way to learn what you would have gotten in class by merely asking me, “What did I miss?” The truth is that you missed 75 minutes of learning.

b) **Send me an email** at XXXX@nvcc.edu to notify me that you will not be there. I do not need the reason, only the statement that you will be absent.

**Check Blackboard,** but do not expect that everything we did in class will be available there.

**Contact another student** prior to the next class to find out what you missed.

Ask me for clarification, not for what you missed.

More students in ENG 111 than in ENF3-ENG 111 chose the student-friendly statement a), rather than the traditional statement b) that uses bolding, underlining, and an imperative tone. The difference in student responses confirms the UVA researchers’ discovery that the syllabus should not be authoritarian, cold, and alienating. It demonstrates that the learning-focused syllabus is more supportive and warmer, and students are more likely to perceive the syllabus positively.

**Question 7:** As one of the choices for question 7, the more traditional statement “Students wishing to speak with a professor should....” was selected by only 10 percent of the students from both
groups. Narrating in the third person and using “students” as the subject does not invite engagement: It demands that the students take the initiative to open a dialogue with their professor, rather than warmly welcoming the students to seek the professor’s help. The responses to this question further attest to the importance of adopting a caring tone in syllabus construction.

**Question 8:** To the question “What do you like to see in a syllabus in terms of how your professor presents information?” The reactions from both groups were similar. They overwhelmingly chose the presentations that used colors, tables, charts, and/or with interactive components and avoided their more static-looking, text-heavy versions.

**Question 9:** Among all the students who responded to the questionnaire, slightly more than 20 percent of the ENG 111 students noted that they did not care which style the syllabus was written in. Only 3 percent more students in ENG 111 than in ENF 3-ENG 111 chose the learning-focused syllabus course over the traditional syllabus one. This result is interesting; it can either mean the differences in style may not be that decisive in affecting student learning experiences, or we need to figure out who those 20 percent of students were: Were they so seasoned learners that they could stay unaffected by the style differences in their learning, or were they learners who were yet to be sensitive to the implication of the differences to their learning experiences? In addition, how many were “primed” about the question? There is still so much for us to figure out.

However, the results from the first five questions are not surprising considering that our community college student body is very diverse. Many of our students are the first in a family to attend a college or are returning to college after years of not reading or writing in academic genres. In this case, the syllabus, that key academic genre, can be a roadblock to student success if it is not carefully crafted and explicitly taught to students.
Also, inherent in our act of delivering the syllabus to our students are the assumptions that our students can read the language used in the syllabus (while the fact is that many cannot understand the abbreviations, the conventions that govern a specific discipline’s writing, and an individual instructor’s writing style); that they can detect patterns, implications, and imbrications embedded in the syllabus (such as the correlation between the hard copy syllabus and its online portion); that they know the paralegal nature of the document; and that they know the afterlife of a syllabus in the long term (such as its later impact on student college transfer).

We recognize that this questionnaire is by no means exhaustive or flawless, and that it may not reflect what syllabus across the disciplines demands of our students. Nevertheless, it confirmed that aspects of the learning-focused syllabus are important: audience awareness is imperative; a student friendly tone matters; proactive interaction is crucial to positive student learning experience; visuals are expected of a contemporary syllabus; and humor generates oxytocin, which the research of scholars such as Meg Daley Olmert (2010) shows is critical to positive communication between all creatures.

Eventually, based on the literature review, the results of the questionnaire, and empirical analyses, we have developed four methods to engage our students in syllabus reading, and for each method we provide one concrete example. During the conferences at which I presented with Dean Daniels in the past three years, we had many requests for specific examples that employ the learning-focused concepts in specific class activities and assignments, and prompts were much sought-after by the teaching community. We are glad to share.

BUILDING A REPertoire OF ASSIGNMENTS TO TEACH THE SYLLABUS

A. Proactive Syllabus Training Activity
Based on the student responses to the questionnaire, we developed a script for interactive online training that can be plugged into some teaching platform, such as Blackboard or Canvas, to educate students about the syllabus so that they can be prepared early on in their college study. The script includes multiple answer questions that introduce the concept, purpose, and different types of the syllabus as well as exposes students to common abbreviations used in the syllabus and tips for effective use of the syllabus (See Appendix A). At present, two of our faculty members are using this script to develop a short training course to plug in our newly adopted Canvas platform to help their students. Individual faculty or schools are welcome to adapt this script in whatever form conducive to their student education.

B. Creative Use of the First Day Diagnostic Assessment

The NOVA English Discipline Group recommends conducting a diagnostic assessment on the first day of class so that the English instructors can understand their students’ particular needs and so they can recommend support services if students seem to need remediation. Accordingly, instructors usually give a diagnostic assessment on the first day of class (such as asking the students to read a short article and then write a short essay) and cover the syllabus and course introduction on the second day. Keeping the syllabus teaching in the foreground of thinking, I designed a short essay assignment for ENG 111 (See Appendix B).

Besides fully functioning as a diagnostic writing assignment, this prompt incorporates the syllabus teaching in an effective manner by requiring that students read the syllabus and write in response to it rather than to an article. Instead of postponing the task of reading the syllabus until the second class, it places the syllabus right in front of the students on the first day, which is when most students expect to see it anyway. It also allows the students a chance to engage with the syllabus on their own terms before their instructor “sells” it. Hence it cultivates student proactive
behavior or habit. It virtually leaves the second class for the instructor to focus on specific questions or knowledge gaps that the students may have about the syllabus.

In terms of adaptability, the assignment can easily be modified to suit whatever course depending on the course level, student readiness, the instructor’s expectations, etc. Indeed, I tested it in my spring 2020 ENG 112 (College Composition II) classes by asking my students to decide if our class’s syllabus is a traditional or learning-focused one. First, my students were surprised to learn that syllabi can be categorized in such a manner. Then they applied the distinction between the two types to evaluate our course syllabus. As it can be imagined, the answers were varied: Most decided it was a learning-focused one; some regarded it as a traditional one; still some discovered that it is a mixture of both types. I was particularly amused and amazed by one student response, not because it deemed my syllabus a learning-focused one (I was pleased to hear that, of course) but because it gave evidence that suggested thorough digestion of the characteristics of a learning-focused syllabus that I had just taught the class. In other words, I saw a response that was “primed.” Meanwhile, I was ensured of the student’s thorough familiarity with all the details in the syllabus as well his adroitness in composing an excellent thesis-driven text in a brief period of time. I drew the conclusion that the student was properly placed in the class. Later he did prove he was a very strong writer in the class. The diagnostic writing assignment that incorporated the syllabus teaching in it certainly served its purpose well.

C. Syllabi as Area of Study

Our colleague Susanna Ferrara developed an assignment titled “Exploratory Argument: Rhetorical Appeals in NOVA Course Syllabi.” The assignment asks the students to analyze multiple syllabi by their own professors by identifying specific examples of ethos, logos, and pathos, and then make a claim about how the students see faculty using rhetorical appeals in the
syllabus documents (See Appendix C). The assignment cleverly develops the students’ knowledge of rhetorical appeals by treating the syllabus/syllabi as a very strong kairos, that is, a strong occasion for writing about arguable issues in a context that is relevant to the students’ educational success. It also makes the syllabus instrumental in teaching one of the most important types of argumentative writing, that is, the exploratory or inquiry argument. By braiding the study of the syllabus, rhetorical skills, and argument writing into one strand, it enables the students’ hands-on exploratory research, analysis, and writing. Our colleague graciously shares this ingenious assignment, so more students will be better served.

D. Syllabus as a Work Model

Imitation builds on existing styles, subject matters, or forms, and redirects them to generate new creative expressions of ideas, views, and sentiments. The syllabus is a written document, so we find instructors can also design an assignment to ask the students to imitate a certain section in the syllabus depending on the course. For example, in an English class almost all syllabi contain a course description and course objectives. The two sections can be used as a writing model. These two sections contain essentially the same information that the students need to know, but they sound very differently and serve different purposes: Course description is written from the current temporal and spatial point of view and allows the students to see what will happen or unfold gradually during the semester. It provides a forward look. Whereas, the course objectives section invites the students to imagine standing at the end of a semester and taking a backward look at what they should have accomplished by then. Course description induces mental preparation for work while the course objectives section helps evoke a strong sense of achievement. Therefore, asking the students to write about how they plan to act out what is described in the course description and where they imagine him- or herself to be in knowledge and skills towards the end
of the semester by imitating/using the forward and backward looks, the students will not only become familiar with the syllabus per se but also learn to write with repetition but not repetitively.

Since we are from the English discipline, the methods introduced here may or may not work for all disciplines in the community college classroom. But in the heart of all these methods is what compositionist Anne Curzan (2017) recommends with two rhetorical questions: “If we are going to expect students to write in class, for example, why not use a short, engaging writing prompt at some point on the first day? If students are going to be solving problems in groups, why not do so on the first day?” (para. 6). Indeed, students often have not mastered any of the specific course content yet, but self-contained activities often can welcome them to our classroom and showcase what we plan to do more than any course description or schedule can. It is with this belief that this essay can stimulate more exemplary pedagogical tools for teaching and learning.
REFERENCES


https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol23/iss1/16
APPENDIX A: STUDENT SYLLABUS TRAINING SCRIPT

1. What is a syllabus?

A syllabus is your guide to a course and what will be expected of you in the course. A syllabus generally includes course policies, required texts, rules and regulations, and a schedule of assignments. A syllabus can tell you nearly everything you need to know about how a course will be run and what will be expected of you.

2. What is the purpose of a syllabus?

The purposes of a syllabus are almost as varied as the possible contents but can be grouped into several categories. A syllabus serves three major roles: as a contract, as a permanent academic record, and most importantly, as a learning tool.

3. What makes the learning-focused syllabi student-friendly?

There are two kinds of syllabi: the traditional syllabi and the learning-focused ones. If you don’t know what the learning-focused syllabi are, here are some of their defining characteristics:

- A focus on student success
- Engaging, question-driven course descriptions
- Long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals
- Clear, measurable learning objectives
- Robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions
- Detailed course schedules
- An inviting, approachable tone
4. **What are the common abbreviations for the days of the week?**

   While constructing syllabi, instructors often use abbreviations for the days of the week to keep their syllabi short. Here are the common abbreviation forms:

   - Monday – M., Mon.
   - Tuesday – T., Tu., Tue., or Tues.
   - Wednesday – W., Wed.
   - Thursday – R., Th., Thu., Thur., or Thurs.
   - Friday – F., Fri.
   - Saturday – S., Sat.

5. **What are office hours?**

   In their syllabi, instructors normally list their office hours, during which you can meet your instructors. There are two types of office hours: walk-in/drop-in office hours and office hours by appointment. The differences between the two types are:

   - walk-in office hours are available for you to meet with your instructors on a first-come, first-served basis.
   - office hours by appointment require you to first schedule an appointment with your instructors and then meet your instructors at the scheduled time.

6. **What do you think of “Office hours: Before and After Class”? Check all that apply.**

   - For readers who do not know or remember the class time, it is meaningless.
   - Even for readers who know how to find the class time, it is not the most convenient to use.
   - Even for readers who know the class time, it is not specific as to how much time is under discussion.
• It leaves much flexibility to the students.
• It leaves much flexibility to the instructor.

7. **Why are Course Objectives important?**

• You are more cognizant of the selected learning materials and instructional approach to the course when you understand course expectations from the beginning.
• You make more connections with the content as you move through the course when you know the sequence of how and why the course was designed.
• The course material will resonate with you more when you are fully aware of the course objectives targeting specific skills, concepts, or knowledge.
• As you are taking the course, you are more likely to ask questions if something doesn’t make sense, especially content directly relating to a particular course objective.
• You are mindful of your own abilities when completing assignments. You are more apt to assess your own work in the course, checking to see firsthand if your performance is meeting those course objectives.

8. **What are the tips that can help you use the syllabus to navigate your semester?**

• At the beginning of the semester, carefully read the whole syllabus and take note of the important dates when exams, assignments, and papers are due.
• Just as you check a map or directions for various intersections along your trip, check the syllabus before each class for reading and other assignments and to gain an idea of the day’s topic.
• If you have used Google Maps, you know directions and maps can sometimes be confusing or even mistaken. When something in the syllabus is unclear, talk to the instructor. Ask
the instructor to help you understand an assignment, or why a certain topic is being covered at a given time.

- Your instructors put a lot of time planning their syllabi, and nothing disgruntles them more than students who do poorly because the students failed to consult the syllabi. Just as you often try to find an answer by reading the FAQ section of a website, try to find an answer by reading a syllabus first.
APPENDIX B: ENG 111 Diagnostic Writing - A Response to the Course Syllabus

Purpose: One of the keys to success in college composition is to ensure that you are properly placed from the start of the semester. As you can understand, both being “overplaced” and “underplaced” can have negative consequences for student success. The essay you are writing now will be used to determine what your individual writing needs are and whether this is the right class for you.

Directions: Read through our class syllabus. Then identify and evaluate all the requirements, expectations, rules, and policies by annotating the syllabus fully. To annotate you need to write notes about your thinking and questioning on the provided paper with easy to track reminders, such as page number, section title, specific sentence, etc. Next, write a response essay to point out what you don’t understand in the syllabus, what might become challenges to you during the semester, and how you plan to deal with those challenges. Your essay should be at least two paragraphs, but you may write more if you wish. Be sure to write a separate concluding paragraph at the end of the essay. When you have finished, reread your essay so that you can check for any errors.

Assessment: I will return your writing with brief comments and suggestions. There will also be a grade, but the grade will not be counted into the final course grade.
APPENDIX C: ENG 112 - ESSAY 1: EXPLORATORY ARGUMENT

RHETORICAL APPEALS IN NOVA COURSE SYLLABI

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to develop your knowledge of rhetorical appeals, ethos, logos, and pathos by writing about them in a context that is relevant to your educational success.

Task: Write a short exploratory argument essay (2-3 pages) that explores how different NOVA course syllabi use rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, and pathos). To develop your argument, you will need to analyze multiple syllabi, identify specific examples of ethos, logos, and pathos, and make a claim about how you see faculty using rhetorical appeals (intentionally or unintentionally) in syllabus documents.

Be sure to include the following elements in your exploratory argument essay:

- An introduction that sets up the subject, context, and purpose for your essay.
- A thesis statement that answers the question: How do you see faculty using rhetorical appeals in their course syllabi?
  - The thesis statement is located at the end of the introduction.
- Use of specific examples from at least two syllabi: your ENG 112 syllabus for this class, and one other from the shared folder. You may include examples from more than two different syllabi if you wish.
- A separate conclusion at the end of the essay to offer wrap up and closure.
- MLA style citations for each syllabus in-text and on a separate Works Cited page.
- Clear definitions of each rhetorical appeal.
- Specific examples of each appeal as you see them in the syllabi you analyze.

Assessment: I will use the Composition Assessment Rubric to evaluate your work during a grading.
APPENDIX D: SYLLABUS SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Read each question and then check ALL the answers that apply to you.

1. When did you first understand what a syllabus was?
   a) In high school or middle school
   b) After I came to NOVA (or another college)
   c) I am still confused by what it is

2. If you are from another country, were you introduced to a syllabus there?
   a) Yes
   b) No

3. How important is the syllabus to you?
   a) It is not very important because the professor will tell me what to do for each class in person anyway.
   b) It is important only at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.
   c) It is important only if I need to see a dean or other authority if I am not happy with my grade.
   d) It is important every day because it contains includes information about due dates, attendance policies, office hours, and I can find information I need without having to ask the teacher.

4. When can you count on your professor being in the office if the syllabus states, “Drop-in Office Hours: M/W 10:30-11:15 AM; T/R 2:00-2:30 PM”?
   a) Mondays at 10:45 in the morning
   b) Tuesdays in the afternoon between 2:00 to 2:30
   c) Fridays in the afternoon between 2:00 and 2:30
   d) Thursdays at 2:15 in the afternoon
5. *Which of the following would be applicable to you if your class syllabus states, “Office Hours by Appointment: T/Th: 8:30-9:30am & Friday morning”?*

   a) You can walk into your professor’s office on any Thursday at 9:15 in the morning and the professor will be there.

   b) Your professor will be there if you have made an appointment for a Tuesday at 8:50 in the morning.

   c) Your professor will not be available on Friday morning unless you have made an appointment for that day.

   d) You can walk into your professor’s office on any Tuesday at 9:00 in the morning and your professor will be there.

6. *How do you feel if your class syllabus states, “Office hours: Before and After Class”?*

   a) I feel I need to ask my professor to clarify how long before and after my class that my professor will be in the office.

   b) I feel that I know exactly when to find my professor.

   c) I feel the office hours are not written in a student-friendly manner.

   d) I feel the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.

7. *How do you read the “course description” and “course objective”?*

   a) I need to read them only once; that’s enough.

   b) I can ignore or skip them when I read the syllabus.

   c) I need to read only one of them.

   d) I read them carefully since they convey a different perspective about the course.
8. Which statement or statements on attendance do you prefer?

c) When you are absent, you do not need to email me, but you may. Please refrain from asking, “What did I miss?” We do so much in a class session, and I won’t sum it up on email for you. I will send occasional updates and recaps on Blackboard. Use your resources: Blackboard, your classmates, and my office hours, to compensate for what you missed on your own time. If you’re sleepy or sick with a fever or something contagious, please stay home.

d) If you are ill or can’t make it, let me know, ahead of time if possible, or by email, so that I can mark you as excused. But bear in mind that an excused absence still counts as an absence. Even though I post your assignments on Blackboard, there is no way to learn what you would have gotten in class by merely asking me, “What did I miss?” The truth is that you missed 75 minutes of learning.

e) Send me an email at XXXX@nvcc.edu to notify me that you will not be there. I do not need the reason, only the statement that you will be absent.

Check Blackboard, but do not expect that everything we did in class will be available there.

Contact another student prior to the next class to find out what you missed. Ask me for clarification, not for what you missed.

f) The above three statements send the same message and I do not care which the professor adopts to deliver the message.

9. Which tone do you prefer your professor to write in?

a) “I welcome you to contact me....”

b) “If you need to contact me....”

c) “Students can contact me....

d) “Students wishing to speak with a professor should....”

10. Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?
b) The second one

c) Both

d) Neither
11. What do you like to see in a syllabus in terms of how your professor presents information?

a) Color blocked

b) Tables, pies, charts

c) Bold or underlined for emphasis

d) Interactive components, e.g. directions to Blackboard, links, websites, sources (Oral Communications Center; Tutoring Center; Language Center; Reading and Writing Center; Computer Lab; Testing Center)

12. Which describes your status?

a) International student at NOVA

b) First in the family to attend a college

c) Returning to college after being away for years

d) None of the above

REFERENCE


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuemin He, Ph.D., is a return author of Inquiry. She teaches English at Northern Virginia Community College at the Annandale campus. She is a recipient of multiple national and campus awards. Her essays, translations, book reviews, and short stories were published in The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature, Oxford Anthology of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry (2nd ed.), Religion and Arts, Metamorphoses, Ezra, The Northern Virginia Review, Yuan Yang, and Cha.
DO THE VERB. BECOME THE NOUN:
WRITING TOWARDS A NEW IDENTITY

MARY K. TEDROW, M.ED., NBCT

ABSTRACT

The initial composition course in the community college has the potential to be a transformative space for the identity formation of adult learners towards the linguistic signifier of scholar. Freshman students of variable ages enter a new culture which demands the negotiation of an alternative academic language, an adaptation to the post-secondary culture, and the development of the critical thinking required for academic work. All of these factors can destabilize identity as students confront long-held beliefs and biases in their studies (Bartholomae, 1985; Tingle, 2004; Bracher, 2006). Students who are unable to adapt to the new environment are likely to leave without realizing personal goals. Adjusting pedagogy to support students through a transformative stage will increase student success.

In this study, freshman composition students reflect on their identities as writers in both pre and post treatment writings which were controlled within the classroom by the instructor. In the treatment, student identity threat was protected through multiple low-risk opportunities, as Peter Elbow (2000) recommends, in order to increase engagement in writing without fear of evaluation. This practice is described as doing the action of the curriculum (the verb) to create a sense of one as writer (the noun). Opportunities to write without the threat of evaluation were offered multiple times at each course meeting. In-class prompting encouraged students to reflect on readings and experiences while writing in their own home language, the language of thought. Post treatment reflections revealed a shift in linguistic identity markers, with 85% of students exhibiting language supporting an increased sense of agency and control over their written
products and a rising confidence in their sense of self as a writer. Few, however, claimed the identity of *writer*, though most exhibited control over their writing destiny through definitive goal statements. This increase in confidence and control indicates that thoughtfully applied pedagogy can shift student identity to that which supports successful post-secondary learning.

**INTRODUCTION**

The local community college is home to a number of non-traditional students as well as the more traditional freshman who arrive in the college setting directly following high school. There are a number of reasons a student might choose a community college. Among them are cost—the community college is more affordable than a four-year college; accessibility—a locally convenient location which requires only a high school diploma and placement exam for matriculation; or self-improvement—many adults return to the school setting to improve their earning power.

Though the reasons vary, many share a similar history: a disaffection with earlier schooling that manifests as a poor self-image of *student*. In the composition class this is translated into a self-image as that of a poor writer. This does not make the community college student unique since “[m]ost people have had bad experiences with writing” (Elbow, 2000, xiv). I call these students *wounded writers*, those who left school with an abiding belief that they are and always will be poor writers. It is these students who are the focus of this study.

Student attitude, like that expressed above, can be a barrier to later success (Bakar et al., 2010; Bracher, 2006). To help students succeed in an introductory composition course, and in college in general, it is helpful for students to visualize themselves as capable writers who can and will improve with effort and attention to the composing process. In fact, the freshman composition course is key to success in accessing the language and norms of the academic
community (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1989; Tingle, 2004). Since “[n]early half of community
college students (47%) drop out entirely” (Cooper, 2017) a focus on mentoring students into this
new and challenging learning environment should drive pedagogical decisions.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief summary of the factors which contribute
to transforming adult learners into new visions of themselves, and proposes low-risk, high
frequency writing in a composition course as a pedagogical method for enhancing this
transformational process. Frequent low-risk writings are an attempt to do the action (the verb) of
the discipline and subsequently act as writers throughout the course. The study which follows
examines the question: What is the effect of high-frequency, low-risk writing on an adult writer’s
self-identity as writer in an introductory composition course at a community college?

Because the inquiry question attempts to examine the effect of a specific pedagogical
practice on the formation of identity—that of writer—two threads bind the research question:
the definition and practice of low-stakes, high-frequency, expressive writing (Elbow, 2000) and
the notion that a composition course is ideally suited to serve as a transformative space to shift
student identity into accepting an academic signifier that would enhance success at the post-
secondary level. For that reason, it is necessary to explore expressive writing—the chosen
classroom intervention—and its relationship to transformational experiences which might
reconstitute student identity.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Though some educators focus on the attainment of knowledge as the primary goal of
education, other theorists posit that identity development should be prioritized because “[t]here is
no more legitimate aim or feasible function for education than the development of students’
identities, if the fundamental purposes of education are indeed to promote learning and
understanding” (Bracher, 2006, p. 5). Identity is defined as “one’s sense of oneself as a force that matters in the world” (Bracher, 2006, p.6). This positive view of one’s identity increases a sense of agency, or the ability to control the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

The formation of identity rests on Lacanian psychology and is referenced frequently in the philosophies of compositional theorists (Elbow, 2000; Tingle, 2004; Bracher, 2006). Jacques Lacan, a post Freudian psychologist, theorizes that the primary goal of existence is to maintain an identity (Lacan & Wilden, 1968). Since the ultimate identity eraser is death, it is a natural outgrowth of the universal desire for a continued ego to marshal resources around identity maintenance. This manifests in an ongoing desire for “recognition, validation, affirmation of the self—even of malignant qualities” (Bracher, 2006, p.7). We hunger for recognition and will go to great lengths to have aspects of our identity affirmed. Witness the rise of social media and the motivation to accumulate likes and retweets as evidence of the strong desire for the recognition we crave.

According to Lacanian psychology, our identities are expressed in three codes: the real, the imagined, and the linguistic (Lacan & Wilden, 1968). Linguistically, we label aspects of our identity through the verbal signifiers we accept and strive to maintain: smart, athletic, manly, nurturing, and so forth. As individuals grow, learning can either threaten or support an identity described through language. When learning supports or enhances identity, it is accepted. When knowledge threatens identity, it is vigorously rejected (Bracher, 2006).

In my teaching, there is clear evidence of students experiencing both identity threat and identity affirmation. Students who experience learning as identity affirming seek to excel in school to further strengthen an identity as scholar, learner, or to be considered smart. Labels affixed to students at an early age, for instance being repeatedly identified as below grade level,
can drive students to reject schooling altogether. Some students reject the label of failure and will expend energy in developing an identity even if it is malignant. *Class clown, bully, or anti-intellectual* are a few malignant identities students may embrace in a rejection of the school culture. Some community college students arrive on campus with these identifiers in tow.

In addition to any existing malignant identities, some degree of identity destabilization occurs to all who enter post-secondary education. This is a natural consequence of the emphasis on critical thinking which may engage students in examining long held beliefs about themselves, their culture, or their own skills and knowledge (Bracher, 2006; Tingle, 2004), and these discussions and queries can destabilize the identity. Instructors are challenged by the need to mitigate the threat to identity that some learning poses while also moving students forward into the realm of critical thought. We can thoughtfully adjust pedagogy to support a positive identity outcome by looking to those who have examined the nature of learning and define a structure for successful transformation.

John Dewey’s (1923) view of education as both personal and resulting from active participation affirms some of the observances of identity formation Jack Mezirow (1997) outlined in his theory of adult transformational learning. According to Dewey (1923), as we enter into new situations, we feel destabilized, but as we become attuned to a new situation or transformative idea through repeated experiences, we learn to both adapt and absorb the experiences into our selfhood (Dewey, 1923, p. 47; Bracher, 2006). The new identity feature is enhanced through the reiteration of specific self-states—those that affirm the emerging identity linguistic signifier. As we do, we become. Our actions (the verb) translate into naming ourselves with new signifiers (the noun).
Mezirow (1997) defines ten distinct transformational phases resulting in both small and large gains in the restructuring of adult thinking which mirror Dewey’s observations. The phases extend through successive stages: a disorienting dilemma; self-examination; a critical assessment; recognition; exploration; planning of a course of action; acquisition of knowledge; building of competence and self-confidence; and a reintegration.

Effective teachers create transformative spaces where student identity is given reign to develop (Tingle, 2004). The two key factors in identity development that can be enacted in a classroom space are public and personal recognition of desirable traits and the provision of repetitive experiences that develop desirable self-states and affirm the targeted linguistic labels. Two such classroom activities that provide these self-states are small and large group discussion, wherein student ideas are affirmed and recognized by sustained attention and implicit approval while engaging vernacular intellectualism—ideas framed in the student’s home language (Elbow, 2000). Opportunities to share and receive both tacit and overt feedback that support desirable academic performance can be provided both orally and in writing (Bracher, 2006; Elbow, 2000; Turner and Paris, 2004). Instructor feedback that accelerates transformation is a focus on responding to the ideas students are developing, even if those ideas are couched in non-academic language.

The entry-level composition course is ideally situated to transform the identities of novice scholars (Tingle, 2004). The College Composition course, in fulfilling its role as an introduction into critical thought, lends itself to moving students successfully through the destabilization of the self, brought about naturally through induction into the world of academia, and into an acceptance of the new linguistic signifier of thinker and writer. We can make pedagogical decisions which support this transformation.
When teacher aim is to transform the identity of the student, then reiterative processes which engage students in the activities of the discipline (i.e. acting as a historian, acting as a scientist, acting as a writer), will both develop and confirm the nascent identity. In the world of composition, this stance is often described as “teaching the writer, not the writing.” The canard, repeated by process-oriented instructors, focuses on the changes instructors hope to evoke in writerly behaviors rather than in managing writerly products. Dewey’s (1923) criteria for learning suggests a combination of personal and repetitive practices which develop the new identity. Low-risk, high-frequency expressive writing provides this structure while also serving the goals of the composition course: to extend skill in written discourse.

**Low-Risk, High-Frequency Writing**

The notion of low-risk, high-frequency writing was developed by Peter Elbow (2000) after examining his own failure to succeed at the graduate level. His definition encourages employing a great deal of writing that does not carry the stigma of grades on a measured scale. The goal of the writing is to overcome the resistance of the learner who must give up some of his identity to conform to the needs of academia. Because it is ungraded, the writing provides space for student identity to play out in reaction to new learning. High-risk writing, that which is graded against the demands of academia, is delayed until the learner has been exposed to many low-risk opportunities. The writings enhance student opportunity to develop ideas without threat. “As teachers we can empower our students. We can help them like writing” (Elbow, 2000, p.xv) through these repetitive, unevaluated free writes. Thus, the identity threat of the new demand is allayed.

All of the low-risk writing activities encourage composers to use expressive writing, defined as that which is nearest to speech, as a method for formulating and examining ideas
before transforming these writings into transformative writing, primarily designated to transmit
information; or into poetic writing whose primary purpose is to stand alone as a work of art
(Britton, 1982, p. 158). This recently defined compositional style—expressive—is accessible to
nearly everyone. If you can talk or think, you can write expressively.

It is these expressive writings which are the substance of the high-frequency, low-risk
writings examined in this study. Elbow (2000) argues that expressive writing assists students in
dabbling in *vernacular intellectualism*, or a process wherein students are able to access and
examine their own thinking. Feedback which affirms the thinking of the writer in the low-risk
environment provides the recognition desired by the ego to incorporate a new linguistic signifier
into the identity. *Thinker, intellectual, student*, and *writer* are all positive identity labels which
enhance a student’s sense of stability and worth in the post-secondary setting. Elbow
recommends responding to the written message as an interested reader (2000, p. 351-359) to
provide the recognition students need to stabilize the identity as one worthy of entering into
academic dialogue.

Reflective writings which ask students to engage in their own processes and methods of
arriving at a truth further add to the student’s self-awareness as a possessor of the needed skills
and dispositions for scholarly work. These brief and personal writings overtly tie linguistic
signifiers to the repeated behaviors and habits instructors wish to develop in the student.

**Summary**

Though there are many transition points in a lifetime wherein identity shifts due to
changes in the body image, circumstance, or intention none can be more important to a learner
than to align oneself with the authorial demands and expectations of the collegiate environment.
Should a pedagogical practice be found which can support learners in this important transition, it
behooves instructors to make the most of the time and opportunity they have in an introductory
composition course to develop and support these new signifiers.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Overview**

In this study I was primarily interested in working with the last three phases of
Mezirow’s (1997) transformational process: the provisional trying on of roles, building
competence and self-confidence through repeated practice, and examining whether the new
identity feature is integrated into the student. One might assume that for many entering the post-
secondary system, the shift in culture provides the disequilibrium necessary to inspire a
disorienting dilemma that Mezirow (1997) mentions as the precipitating event for adult learning.
Matriculation into this dilemma may also account for the high attrition rate among first-year
students unable to make the transition from a perceived dilemma into the self-examination
necessary for transformation and success in the post-secondary climate.

In previous classrooms, I observed that many students claimed to have a shift of
viewpoint around the task of writing after repetitive, low-risk writing activities. When feedback
was limited to recognition and support of student thinking, it appeared that students became
more engaged in using writing to examine thinking, and their self-confidence grew. The study
was devised to formally test this observation in an effort to determine if frequent, low-stakes
writing shifts student self-image.

**Research Design**

This study was limited to two freshman composition courses led in a single semester in
2018 at Lord Fairfax Community College: English 111, College Composition I and English 112,
College Composition II. The demographics of this rural community college reflect the mix of
traditional and non-traditional students attracted to educational gains. Traditional students, those entering shortly after high school, make up 51% of the student body and fall into the 17 to 21-year range. A full 30% of students are in the 22-59-year range with dual enrollment students taking classes in the high school environment comprising the rest of the student body. Additionally, more of the enrollees are part-time (72%) than full-time students (28%) (Lord Fairfax Community College, 2018).

The English 111, College Composition I course met face-to-face, twice a week for 75 minutes. The English 112, College Composition II class met one evening a week for 90 minutes and was almost entirely comprised of working adults. The focus of College Composition I is on developing an argument supported with credible sourcing. College Composition II immerses students in both a research project and an overview of literary criticism. Knowledge and control over aspects of academic writing is an expected outcome for successful students.

The study was prepared prior to the commencement of classes. All procedures involving human subjects were reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board. This included securing permissions from Lord Fairfax Community College and individual students for data collection.

On the first day of class, prior to any instruction, both classes received the same pre-treatment reflective question: Complete the stem with your own thoughts. "When I think about writers I..." and "When I think about myself as a writer I..." At the end of the ten-week study period, both classes received the same follow up, post-treatment reflective question: Please write the number of words you estimate you have written to this point in the course. Then answer: After reviewing the written work that you have produced thus far in this class, what is your current view of yourself as a writer--one who makes meaning in text? (The estimated word
count was a homework assignment as a requirement for the end-of-course portfolio. Students were asked to come prepared to share their word count.) The two prompts were answered on 3x5 cards and turned in as an attendance artifact.

The treatment consisted of routine, ungraded responsive writings conducted within the class time period which could be observed and controlled by the instructor. Topics for the prompts were related to readings, life experience, and the use of writing to support learning. (For a full listing of the prompts see Appendix I.) After exposing all students to frequent writing, the post treatment prompt was assigned at the end of ten weeks. Only the pre and post treatment responses were analyzed and coded.

Data Collection

All responses to the pre and post treatment prompts were written on 3x5 cards signed and dated by the student and collected and secured for later coding. All opportunities offered for low-risk writing were recorded and dated by the instructor. Both classes wrote a minimum of twice during scheduled meetings. The Composition I class, which met twice-a-week, was exposed to approximately twice as many writing opportunities (54) than the once-a-week evening Composition II course (26). At every meeting, class began with prompted writing on a 3x5 card which was turned in as an attendance verification. These responses were stored and reviewed for further responsive instruction in class meetings. Student names were replaced with a numerical coding and all identity markers were obscured on the data collection spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

Pre and post treatment student responses were compared for linguistic markers which might indicate a shifting attitude toward the identity of writer. The responses were categorized
based on linguistic signifiers present in the writing. Only students who were present for the entire study and who agreed to the data collection are represented in the results described here.

Some pre-treatment responses indicated that the student had little to no relationship to the role of writer. These were coded as “no relationship to writer identity.” Most responses revealed that students felt a lack of agency or an ability to exert control over the task, often viewing writing as something done to them rather than an action under their control. Exemplary comments coded this way include:

“I think that I just try my best to have a well graded paper, and am just trying to get it over with.”

“I think of a person who is unable to express my thoughts into a form of writing.”

“I think of something that’s difficult for me. I take time to come up with a thought, let alone write a book.”

A second category identified pre-treatment responses where the student appeared to express some ownership and agency around the task of writing. These students seemed to have already adopted a relationship to the role of writer and were coded “identifies as writer.” The following are two responses coded this way from the opening prompt:

“I think I attempt to do my best to express & explain how I feel.”

“I think I am very good but there is much room for improvement.”

After the treatment, many more students exhibited ownership, seeing writing as a controllable task by using language which included a self-evaluative statement coupled with a goal statement. These coupled responses, which appeared with remarkable frequency in spite of the fact that the prompt did not request a goal statement, indicate that the student has begun to assume a sense of control over the writing task and were coded as “ownership of identity.”
Though not overtly claiming the identity of author, as appeared in studies done at the elementary level after younger students were exposed to frequent, low-risk writing opportunities over a similar ten-week period (Davis, 1990; Edwards, 1995; Gau, Hermanson, Logar & Smerek, 2003; Knight, 2008), these students express an awareness of their ability to control a product through the writing task. There was a surprising consistency in the pattern of evaluative statement followed by goal statement. The following are two statements which exhibit this consistent pattern:

“After reviewing all of my written work, I think that I have improved since taking ENG 111. I do think I need some improvement. I would like to improve the flow of my writing.”

“As a writer I think I'm finding better ways to make my words a bit more meaningful. I need to not use so much slang and maybe enhance my vocabulary a bit.”

These students exhibit a self-evaluation followed by an articulation of next steps to improvement which clearly mirrors Mezirow’s (1997) transformative stages of a recognition of dissatisfaction, an exploration of alternatives, and a plan for action.

**College Composition I**

In the twice-a-week Composition I class, 24 students began the semester but only 18 lasted throughout the study period. Of those 18 only 13 successful pre and post-treatment responses were recoverable due to absences. Seven students initially indicated no connection to the identity of writer.

Five identified as writer and these identities were maintained throughout the treatment. One responded to the act of handwriting and the initial pre-treatment prompt was unusable.
After ten weeks and 54 ungraded, low risk writing experiences, 12 students identified more closely as writer by using language indicating a sense of agency over the writing task. One student remained resistant. Two of the 12 students who claimed a sense of agency also expressed an unprompted, positive affect toward the act of writing.

**College Composition II**

Because of the nature of the once-a-week meeting, these students were exposed to far fewer of the controlled prompts provided within the meeting time. Attrition was also extremely high. Twenty students began the course and only 11 lasted through the study period. Of those 11, three denied the use of their collected data. Of the remaining eight students, one pre-tested as a resistant writer; one identified in the pre-test as a writer and this identity was maintained; six pre-tested with no expressed identity related to writer.

After ten weeks and 26 ungraded, low-risk writing experiences, six students used language indicating a connection to the role of writer by expressing a sense of agency over the writing task while two students stated clear resistance (one shifting from an unclear identity to resistant).

Though the sample size is very small for both classes (12 in the College Composition I course and eight in the College Composition II course) the resulting shift in language among the students of the study is comparable. A majority of students subjected to frequent, expressive writing opportunities expressed a more positive attitude toward writing in general over the initial pre-treatment inquiry around writing. In the Composition I course, those with a more positive connection to writing shifted from 38% to 92% over the ten week period. In the evening Composition II course, attitude and ideas around writing shifted from 12% positive view to a 75% positive view. Additionally, student responses indicated a new understanding of what it
means to write, making more references to getting their thoughts right over comments on surface features like spelling or punctuation. (See Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification of Prompt Responses</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifies As Writer (Expresses Agency)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Relationship To Writer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unscoreable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighty-five percent of the 18 students who made it through the complete study included language which indicated a growth in agency over the writing task. All of these responses included a self-evaluation of writing skills (“I feel like I have become more of a sophisticated writer”) followed by some kind of goal statement (“I view myself as a pretty decent writer, but I could be better if I took more time while writing”). Two students expressed an increased pleasure in writing over previous experiences.

The responses imply that the students have begun to see themselves as actors in the quality and skill development of the academic writing task. This shift could result from prompts which ask students to routinely reflect on their writing process and to explore the development of high-risk writing assignments. Mezirow (1997) indicates that true transformational learning must include some reflection on tasks completed. Many of the prompted writings asked students to do that thinking in writing.
LIMITATIONS

It must be stated that the classroom setting has a number of variables which affect student attitude and these variables are not included in this study. Students in both classes were exposed to models of excellence in writing for both argument and academic research. Discussions in class included awareness of the recursive nature of writing and methods for managing the task, the importance of initially privileging idea formation over form, and the connection of academic writing to lived experience. These variables could be controlled by employing the pre and post treatment prompts in two classes: one designed around frequent, low-risk writing and one where regular low-risk, high-frequency writing opportunities are not a pedagogical practice.

Because the night class met only once-a-week, this limited the number of controlled writings. High absenteeism among some students further reduced the number of writing opportunities. It could be assumed that this would affect the outcome. Unlike the earlier studies in elementary classrooms where attendance is routine and mandatory (Davis, 1990; Edwards, 1995; Gau, Hermanson, Logar & Smerek, 2003; Knight, 2008), frequent absenteeism in both classes affected the number of writings. Additionally, the small sample size in both classes could lead to highly variable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the continual, low-risk nature of the writings had a positive effect on most of the students. The repeated practice under low threat allowed students the time and space to both recognize their own vernacular intelligence (Elbow, 2000) and to develop an understanding of writing as another expressive tool for examining and clarifying thinking. By consistently focusing on the thinking revealed in the writing, students gained confidence in their role as participant in academic discourse.
As is reflected in the national data, both classes in the study saw declining enrollment as the course progressed. Nearly half of community college students (47%) drop out according to the National Student Clearinghouse (Cooper, 2017, December 19). This is nearly double the dropout rate for four-year public schools and is well above the 31% drop out rate for all four-year schools. Forty-four students in the study began the semester, and 23 successfully completed the two courses. This 52% drop in enrollment is a concern for any college community.

Enrollment attrition was highest in the evening class where working parents expressed frustrations in dealing with the pressures of full-time work, full-time parenting, and college course requirements. Perhaps other supports need to be in place to increase attendance and success rates. Adjusting instruction to accommodate a shift in identity will increase the likelihood of student success and impact these high attrition rates.

The high attrition stresses the importance of these freshmen level classes to accommodate shifting student identities to those aligned with the academic community. As has been suggested in earlier studies and commentary (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1989; Elbow, 2000; Tingle, 2004), entrance into postsecondary education is just the sort of destabilizing experience Dewey (1925) and Mezirow (1997) observed as prompting new learning. Surely in the community college setting, the cultures of the working class and academic community clash (Rose, 1989) and a space must be provided for reflection and integration of new, foreign skills. Thoughtfully applied pedagogy in the College Composition courses can serve the dual purposes of reflection and skill integration. Any new learning can be scaffolded and supported through repeated, low-risk practice. Other disciplines can incorporate reflective writing to support student identity formation in their fields. Low-risk written reflections are a further tool for encouraging reflection on any
learning. Students can see and name what they are experiencing and integrate it into their identities.

It is suggested that all instructors would benefit from engaging students in doing the verb of their discipline: Mathematicians acting as mathematicians; historians immersed in examining history; scientists engaged in meaningful science. Not unlike apprenticeships of old, where initiates work alongside mentors, we can purposefully transform student identity and thus their success by immersing students in the work of the discipline in an inviting and welcoming manner. Transformative learning would be enhanced with the integration of reflective writing throughout the disciplines where low-risk writings support the development of desirable traits.

REFERENCES


Gau, E., Hermanson, J., Logar, M., & Smerek, C. (2003). Improving Student Attitudes and Writing Abilities through Increased Writing Time and Opportunities.


APPENDIX I

Instructor Prompting for Low-Risk Writing

ENG 111 (75 minutes, twice a week)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/21/18</td>
<td>3x5 card &quot;When I think about writers I...&quot; &quot;When I think about myself as a writer I...&quot;</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brain Dump - 4.5 minutes - write what you are thinking</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressive writing - write about your name (used Sandra Cisneros &quot;My Name&quot; as model) 7 min.</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HW: Plan the ideal schedule. Write about challenges to the schedule and how to resolve them</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/23/18</td>
<td>3x5 card Locate 2 Challenge's you imagined that might hinder you in your ideal weekly schedule. Write them on the card.</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lesson on writing daily for mental health and practice</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annotation with article.</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsive notemaking</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/28/18</td>
<td>3x5 card--copy your MLA citation from the top of your notes to the card.</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invitational sentence practice followed with writing on selected topic.</td>
<td>ungraded but shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8/30/18
3x5 card: List two issues you have uncovered in observations since the last class.

Responsive notemaking

Invitational sentence practice followed with writing on selected topic.

9/6/18
3x5 card: Copy the MLA citation from the top of your paper for the reading you completed “But What Do You Mean?”

Process Log #1 How did you get your idea for your paper? Be sure to explain where your idea came from and why you chose it. Consider writing about what you think you already know or hope to learn.

9/11/18
3x5 card: Describe one source you have located around your chosen issue.

Write for a few minutes in your notebook: What makes the Alfie Kohn article a Researched Argument? What is his claim (opinion)? Can you find a sentence where he states his opinion clearly? How does he support his opinion? What is your response to his claim? Does anything in your experience agree or disagree with his statements?

Drones: Write for a few minutes.... What is your current opinion on drones? What is your current opinion on drones? Share the flyer. Look at Bedford Reader page 23 (examining an image) Revisit your opinion on drones. Do you want to add or change anything?
9/13/18  Students took the Information Literacy pretest

9/18/18  3x5 card: Write your claim about drones on the card. These will be shared in a stand and deliver.

Journals for each essay we have read in the text (We’re Not, Peculiar Benefits, But What do you Mean? The Crummy First Draft)

Process Log #2 Describe an interesting problem you encountered in your research this week. Be prepared to share this with the class.

3x5 Card: Describe your method for preparing your Process essay. Did you take any specific steps to getting the assignment completed on time?

Invitational sentence practice followed with writing on selected topic.

Process Log #3 Consider the sources you have located to this point. What views do they represent? Do you have any holes in your resources? Do you need to do more research?

3x5 Card - What seems easy for you? What difficulties are you having?

From the sheet, write 100-200-word annotation explaining the article.

Invitational sentence practice followed with writing on selected topic.

3x5 card: You should have six good sources by now. Quickly list the different claims (opinions) you have found about your issue. Do you have a variety?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Shared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/2/18</td>
<td>High engagement Survival activity: Individually choose your seven survivors with a “reason” Look at your reasons. Are any of them pathos, logos, ethos?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2/18</td>
<td>3x5 card - what will you be arguing in your researched argument paper? Write a single sentence.</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Going over the Example essay and the essay “Black Men in Public Space” What makes the author especially credible in the essay? What is his claim? Have you ever altered public space?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write for a few minutes about homework you did in k-12 grades. What kinds of homework were you asked to do? Do any particular assignments stand out? Which did you think was helpful? Which wasn’t?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/18</td>
<td>3x5 card: How many sessions did you have on your Example essay during drafting?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practice with sentences (not much writing)</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process Log #4--In your process log, write about your experiences in the peer response group. How is working or not working for you? What have you learned about collaborating around writing? Can you use anything you have gained in working on other papers?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/9/18</td>
<td>3x5 card: How many journal entries have you made in your reading?</td>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>MID TERM--first high stakes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/11/18</td>
<td>3x5 card What were your thoughts about Jocks vs. Nerds?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downdraft found poem with sharing</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
<td>shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10/16/18

3x5 card: Think about the last time you had to support a claim when arguing with someone to convince them to agree with you. What claim were you arguing? How did it turn out?

#1 Zero Draft: Introduction, Body of the paper, Conclusion

Process Log #5: In your process log, write about your experiences in the peer response group. How is working or not working for you? What have you learned about collaborating around writing? Can you use anything you have gained in working on other papers?

10/17/18

3x5 card: Write a question you have about the sample essay you read on page 513-519.

Process Log #6: Reflect on the zero draft. How did it work or not work for you? What have you learned about this step in composition and its usefulness—or waste of time—for completing future papers and writing assignments?

10/23/18

3x5 card: How does the essay “How to Identify Love by Knowing What It’s Not” fit the criteria for a definition essay?

Looking at sentences: Modeling from Augustus Burroughs long followed by short, dramatic sentences

10/25/18

3x5 Card What did you choose to define? Why did you select this?

Write about a song you like at the current time. What does the music say about you? Share your writing with a partner.
Working with sentences: Model sentence about the punctuation of titles and names.

Process Log #7: In your process log, write about your practice essays. In your reflection, consider the following: You have written four. Has the process gotten easier? Harder? Why? Of the essay types, which do you find easiest? Hardest? (we have done narrative with compare/contrast, process, example, analysis, definition) How have the practice essays impacted your Researched Argument?

3x5 card: Please write the number of words you estimate you have written to this point in the course. Then answer: After reviewing the written work that you have produced thus far in this class, what is your current view of yourself as a writer—one who makes meaning in text?

**ENG 112 (90 minutes once a week)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/20/18</td>
<td>3x5 card &quot;When I think about writers I...&quot; &quot;When I think about myself as a writer I...&quot;</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brain Dump - 4.5 minutes - write what you are thinking</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressive writing - write about your name (used Sandra Cisneros &quot;My Name&quot; as model) 7 min. Annotations as a record of your thinking.</td>
<td>ungraded but shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write out your ideal schedule for the week - Reflect, what are challenges to the schedule?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy Narrative - in letter format write a narrative of your literary history. End with three questions about your history?</td>
<td>ungraded with questions shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8/27/18

3x5 card Describe two challenges to your schedule and two solutions
Response writing in response to an article
Brainstorming quick write in response to Questions for Memoirists

9/10/18

3x5 card What are some keywords you are using to search for articles on your selected research topic
Personal memoir piece shared in small groups

9/17/18

3x5 card: Describe three sources you have found.
Downdrafts: practice a new beginning for memoir. Practice an exploded moment.
Create a plan for Primary Research - shared with group and instructor

9/24/18

3x5 card: What is your plan for Primary Research?
Read article-write one paragraph summary and share
Downdraft of the process used in Primary Research

9/1/18

3x5 Card: What have you learned from your Primary Research?
Downdraft of the entire Research paper with teacher modeling
Reflective writing on the peer response groups

10/8/18

3x5 card: List the days and times you worked on your research paper. Have you started your Lit Terms guide?
Cover Letter: Reflective writing on the Research paper (Elbow) What do you see as your main points? How did you go about completing the writing and what helped you along the way? Which parts are you most satisfied with? Which parts are you least satisfied with? What questions do you have for me as a reader?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task Description</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/22/18</td>
<td>3x5 card Which of the short stories did you find the most satisfying to read? Why?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose a song and analyze what it says about you. Wrote for seven minutes and shared with partner</td>
<td>ungraded but shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three reads of &quot;Story of an Hour&quot; with development of a thesis based on one sentence--discussion and share out</td>
<td>ungraded but shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/29/18</td>
<td>3x5 card: Please write the number of words you estimate you have written to this point in the course. Then answer: After reviewing the written work that you have produced thus far in this class, what is your current view of yourself as a writer--one who makes meaning in text?</td>
<td>ungraded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX II

Pre and Post student responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENG111</th>
<th>2 x week</th>
<th>Identity Markers</th>
<th>Post Treatment</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td></td>
<td>identifies with writer</td>
<td>8,500 words. I feel like I have improved, but also that I have more to improve on, as well. I have started to like writing more, but I see now that I should take things further and work on expanding on my ideas a bit more.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td></td>
<td>no relationship to writer identity</td>
<td>6,000 words. I view myself as a better writer than before I entered this class.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>203</td>
<td></td>
<td>no relationship to writer identity</td>
<td>5,750 words. As a writer I am very straight forward with my beliefs and my claims. I view myself as a pretty decent writer, but I could be better if I took more time while writing.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td></td>
<td>identifies with writer</td>
<td>12,000 words. I think I am quite an elegant writer having detailed writing in some scenarios [sic]. I do however tend to venture off at the end.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>205</td>
<td></td>
<td>seeing writing as physical task</td>
<td>More than 6,500. I still have room for improvement and to better myself.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td></td>
<td>no relationship to writer identity</td>
<td>8,736 words. My current view of myself as a writer is that I have improved in my writing skills but also in the meaning of what I have written. I have realized that it’s important to write what you are passionate about.</td>
<td>ownership of identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When I think about myself as a writer I think it is hard for me to get my fast-thinking thoughts on to paper. 7,000-10,000 words. I actually enjoy writing a little more. My essays are always a little short thought. I feel like writing something on demand is easier.

When I think about myself being a writer, I think how can I get as good as the rest? 6,000 - 8,000 words. After reviewing the work I have written in this class so far, I realized I’m starting to grow as a writer. My essays are becoming more in detail as I go along.

When I think about myself as a writer, I think of having ideas, but unable to transfer those thoughts into a fluent story. 1300-1500 words (researcher remark: way underestimated) I feel like I am a decent writer, but I still have a lot to learn before I am a good writer.

When I think about myself as a writer, I think that I want to expand my strengths and build upon my weaknesses to create more strengths. 12,182 words. I think my writing is in an appropriate spot for my level. There are of course things I need to approve and expand on, but I’m not behind. I find that I elaborate, use strong vocabulary words, and maintain an appropriate flow throughout my writing.

When I think about myself as a writer I can see that I am average. I don’t have the knowledge of many words to express my thoughts. 10,000 words. In high school I struggled to get 200 words in my writing assignments, now I write 400 or more in each essay. It’s a huge step for me.

When I think of myself as a writer I think of nothing due to my limitations subconsciously. 7,723 words. I have honestly surprised myself in the amount of effort I’ve been able to put in. Just that alone has improved my writing in the class.

When I think about myself as a writer, I think I attempt to do my best to express & explain how I feel. 8,500 words. I’ve learned and improved as a writer and have discovered a new love of writing. I hope I’m making my grandfather proud because he was an English teacher & professor.

ENG 112 1x week Code POST treatment Code

When I think about myself as a writer I think that I am not that great at writing. 7,403 words. I did not notice that I have wrote so much during this class. I do not really see myself as a writer.
When I think about myself as a writer, I think that I wish I had the capacity to write like "really good" writers.

When I think about myself as a writer, I think poorly of it. I'm never really satisfied with my writings and I always second guess what I put on the page. I can speak well, but putting it on paper is the hard part for me.

When I think about myself as a writer, I think that I'm slow to write because I must translate my ideas Spanish to English.

When I think of myself as a writer, I think of something that's difficult for me. I take time to come up with a thought, let alone write a book.

When I think of myself as a writer, I think I'm too busy with words, and add too much drama.

When I think of myself as a writer I tend to lean towards fiction or real life experiences. As a writer I wish there'd only be on text format. Grammar's also important!

3,518 words. After reviewing all of my written work, I think that I have improved since taking ENG 111. I do think I need some improvement. I would like to improve the flow of my writing.

About 6,837. I still have a hard time getting my writing to portray the image in my head, but the class is helping me think differently and find new ways to do things.

6,123 Words. My current view as a writer is that I can write a little more ease and faster than before.

7,000 words. I feel like I've written a lot more than that. I feel like I have become more of a sophisticated writer, especially with my job and taking classes. I have improved a lot.

5,300 words. As a writer I think I can better put my thoughts on paper now.

4,000 words. My work is never good enough, it could always be better. Though I find the more I pull it apart the worse it gets. With myself I just don't ever think I am good enough.

6,000 words. As a writer I think I'm finding better ways to make my words a bit more meaningful. I need to not use so much slang and maybe enhance my vocabulary a bit.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol23/iss1/16
MATHEMATICS COREQUISITE REMEDIATION AND DIRECT ENROLLMENT: ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS AND CONCERNS

ZACHARY BEAMER, ED.D.

ABSTRACT

In Fall 2020, the VCCS will begin implementing the Direct Enrollment Pilot, building upon lessons learned in prior reforms and successes of reforms in other states. In the new corequisite model of developmental education, students at the margins of college preparation are placed directly into the college coursework with a supplemental support class. This Notes in Brief article summarizes some of the research behind the transition towards this model and the implications of this scholarship on current reform efforts. It directly addresses concerns regarding the move towards corequisite instruction and provides recommendations for how to implement reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Many students enter higher education with poor preparation for college mathematics courses. Historically, these incoming students have been required to take high-stakes placement tests that place many into developmental mathematics courses that do not bear credit towards graduation. At 2-year colleges, 59% of students enroll in developmental coursework (Chen, 2016), required as a prerequisite for college-level material. However, based on student pass rates and retention, developmental mathematics is more often a roadblock than a bridge to credit-level mathematics. Only 45% of students who enroll in developmental mathematics eventually earn
Recent scholarship doubting the value of high-stakes placement tests and prerequisite developmental coursework has prompted major reform efforts across the nation. More students are now directly enrolling into gatekeeper college courses, such as Quantitative Reasoning, Statistical Reasoning, and Precalculus. To provide additional support, marginally prepared students will also be required to enroll into corequisite support classes that are paired with college-level courses, taught in the same semester. This document succinctly addresses a number of concerns and misconceptions surrounding the current reforms taking place in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), with an emphasis on mathematics courses. Additionally, it provides an overview of recommendations from research and their consequences which can inform the Direct Enrollment pilot.

**Misconception:** Students cannot succeed in a college-level mathematics course without a foundation in basic algebra skills.

**Reality:** Research indicates that more students may be able to be successful in college-level mathematics coursework than the remedial algebra courses that typically serve as prerequisites for such courses. In a randomized control study by Logue, Watanbe-Rose, and Douglas (2016), students at marginal levels of preparation were randomly assigned to one of three courses: an elementary algebra course, an elementary algebra class with a workshop, or an elementary statistics course with corequisite support. While 56% passed the elementary statistics course, only 39% of students placed into an elementary algebra course were successful, which only improved to 45% of elementary algebra students with a workshop.
**Misconception:** Placing developmental-level students directly into credit-level coursework will have a disastrous effect on their grade outcomes in gatekeeper courses.

**Reality:** Several studies have suggested that the benefits of remedial coursework are minimal at best. Moss, Yeaton, and Lloyd (2014) looked at the effect of using two different placement score cutoffs using a randomized control trial. The lowest scoring students were sent to remediation, and the highest into credit-level coursework. Those scoring in the middle range were assigned to one or the other. Using causal quantitative methods, the authors estimated that the effect of receiving remediation increased performance in credit-level coursework. However, the improvement was minimal, slightly less than *one-third of a letter grade* – roughly the equivalent of moving from a C to a C+.

Quarles and Davis (2017) theorize that prerequisite developmental algebra courses have minimal benefit because they often emphasize procedural skills that are forgotten before the time a student can use them in a gatekeeper course. In their study, students starting a precalculus class after completing a mathematics course the previous semester correctly answered only about 52% of procedural skill-based questions on an assessment of prerequisite algebra material. Students who had not taken mathematics courses for at least a semester were only able to correctly answer 25 to 30% of these same procedural skill questions at the start of their precalculus course. So even when students do pass developmental coursework, they may have forgotten a majority of the skills they learn before they have an opportunity to use them in a college course.

**Concern:** The new placement measures will inaccurately identify students as ready for college-level mathematics.
Reality: High-stakes placement testing already inaccurately identifies students’ preparedness for college-level mathematics. Upwards of one quarter of students assigned to developmental mathematics could have earned a B or better in gatekeeper courses, according to statistical analysis of factors predictive of success by Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2014) and Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez (2015). Research by Ngo and Kwon (2015) suggests that using high school GPA and previous mathematics coursework can identify additional students who can successfully complete college courses at rates similar to those identified by placement testing. Ultimately, all measures of placement will have flaws and limitations. Fortunately, well-implemented corequisite support courses (e.g., Adams et al., 2009) can address the limitations of placement measures by giving instructors opportunities to identify and address gaps in student knowledge.

Concern: Failure rates in gatekeeper courses will go up because of the increased number of underprepared students starting in college-level coursework.

Reality: It is a possibility that placing more students at the margins of preparation into higher-level coursework may negatively impact overall success rates in sections of gatekeeper courses. Faculty teaching these courses and administrators monitoring the impact of reforms should proactively address this scenario. However, it is a mistake to use this statistic as the sole measure of reform success.

Transitioning to corequisite models requires educators to reinterpret what counts as success. The most notable failure of prerequisite developmental sequences is that the majority of students who begin in developmental mathematics never successfully complete a college-level course (Chen, 2016). In fact, some studies suggest upwards of half of students do not even complete their first developmental course (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). A more informative
metric to gauge the success of reforms is to see whether they increase the number of students passing gatekeeper courses.

Research on corequisite remediation is beginning to show substantial improvements in the ultimate success of underprepare students. The first causal quantitative research study on corequisite reforms started by Tennessee in 2015 have recently been compiled into a working paper by Ran & Lin (2019). Their research estimates that students placed into corequisite remediation are 15 percentage points more likely to pass a gatekeeper level mathematics course within their first year than those placed into prerequisite developmental coursework.

**Misconception:** Research shows that developmental education is a programmatic failure and should be completely replaced by corequisite models of instruction.

**Reality:** Many studies that have measured the effectiveness of remediation have employed a quasi-experimental method called regression discontinuity (RD) design (e.g., Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2012; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015). This design investigates the impact of remediation by comparing students at either side of a cutoff score for a placement test. The first group is sent to remediation by scoring just under the threshold, while the second group is placed directly into gatekeeper courses; since the score difference between groups near the cutoff is small, statistical regression can provide a reasonable estimate of the causal effect of receiving remediation.

Results from these studies are mixed, but overall they support the conclusion that receiving remediation has a negligible impact upon success in future gatekeeper coursework or degree completion. In other words, these studies suggest that students at marginal levels of preparation are no more successful in future courses after receiving remediation; furthermore, beginning in developmental coursework does not improve retention. However, this conclusion must be
tempered by limitations of the RD design. Estimates for the impact of remediation are only valid for *individuals near the score cutoff* (Jacob et. al, 2012). That is, students *far below* placement thresholds may still benefit from prerequisite remedial coursework.

**Misconception:** The current reforms are the product of VCCS administrators who are unfamiliar with the classroom issues instructors face and just want to get rid of developmental education.

**Reality:** The VCCS Direct Enrollment Faculty Mathematics Leads subcommittee has been integral in crafting these reforms. The Steering Committee has approved a number of recommendations based on mathematics faculty suggestions for enhancing student success, including the following:

- Changing the goals of reform from *elimination* of prerequisite developmental education to *limiting* these courses to students with the greatest need for them
- Creating prerequisite developmental education courses – MDE 10, Introduction to Algebra, and MDE 60, Intermediate Algebra – that are focused on exactly the skills required in subsequent gatekeeper courses
- Increasing the number of credit hours of corequisite support classes (MDE 54, MDE 55, and MDE 61) to 3, allowing for additional contact time
- Collecting two years of data on student success (gatekeeper success rates, student retention) to inform decisions on scaling reforms across the system

**Misconception:** The new Mathematics Direct Enrollment (MDE) corequisite courses need to cover all of the content that used to be covered in the previous developmental sequences.
**Reality:** Misalignment between remedial and credit-level courses is one contributing factor to why students starting in prerequisite remediation struggle to succeed in credit-level coursework (Goldwasser, Martin, and Harris, 2017). The course objectives of the MDE courses overlap with those of their paired gatekeeper course. This reflects the goal to use the corequisite courses to provide whatever supports are necessary for success in the paired credit-level course. This may not entirely correspond with all of the previously covered objectives in MTE 1-9, particularly in MDE 54 & 5. Instructors in the new model could instead use instructional time, for example, to discuss calculators or spreadsheet software. Content that is no longer relevant for gatekeeper courses is no longer an objective.

**Misconception:** There is no point in gathering student feedback for the use of class time in MDE courses.

**Reality:** Students express varying preferences for use of class time (Beamer, 2019). Some students prefer to dedicate time in the class to work on homework, while others may prefer the instructor to review the most difficult concepts from the day’s class. Given the need for the corequisite courses to respond to individual student needs, instructors may wish to take a balanced, structured approach. Instructors can use class time to clarify the week’s concepts, offer additional individual or group practice, or encourage students to summarize and reflect on their learning. Research by Davis (2009) indicates that soliciting feedback throughout the semester can improve student motivation and learning outcomes.

**Misconception:** It does not matter how colleges implement corequisite instruction; it is only important that colleges abandon prerequisite developmental education.
Reality: There are multiple possible formats for implementing these corequisite classes. Some colleges in the Tennessee corequisite reforms offered face-to-face courses, while others administered them in a hybrid or online format (Ran & Lin, 2019). Research on the effectiveness of comparative models corequisite models of remediation are in their nascent stages. In their estimates of the causal impact of corequisite remediation, Ran and Lin (2019) note the limitation that they lacked details on the quality of implementation at institutions involved in reforms. Ongoing research on the impacts of design details on success outcomes is taking place in other states such as Texas (Daugherty et. al, 2018) Early research on corequisite pilot programs from Maryland (Adams et al., 2009) suggests several aspects that may help facilitate successful reform:

- Keep a small class size to increase the opportunities that corequisite instructors have to provide relevant remediation on a targeted basis.
- Use a cohort of remediated students from one section of a gatekeeper course so that students can build strong interpersonal relationships and feel comfortable asking questions.
- Schedule heterogeneously grouped sections of a gatekeeper course, mixing marginally prepared corequisite students with those who place directly may lead to positive peer effects on less-prepared students.
- Address both credit-level and remedial-level content in the corequisite course ensures that corequisite instructors can address whatever aspect is keeping their students from succeeding in the gatekeeper course.
- Attend to non-academic issues that interfere with student success, such as behavioral issues, study skills, or challenges outside of the classroom.

Conclusions and Further Questions
Scholarship on developmental mathematics has cast doubt on the value of sending large numbers of incoming students into long sequences of prerequisite courses before they are allowed to engage in college-level mathematics. Moving towards corequisite remediation offers the possibility to improve the number of students completing college mathematics courses. However, scholarship on corequisite reforms is in its nascent stages, and it is not clear how the details of reform implementation may impact its success. As the VCCS moves forward with the Direct Enrollment Pilot, educators and administrators will need to address several questions.

- How do colleges involved in the Direct Enrollment Pilot implement reforms, and how do these implementation details affect student success?
- What unanticipated challenges do pilot colleges encounter, and how should they be addressed?
- What modifications to placement and curriculum are needed before such reforms may be expanded across the VCCS?
- What practices to staffing, scheduling, course structure, and instruction ensure student success?
- How can the VCCS monitor the success of reforms beyond measures of pass rates and student retention?

The VCCS Direct Enrollment reforms offer an excellent opportunity to rethink how to prepare students to engage with college level coursework. The engagement and collaboration of faculty and administration across colleges is crucial for the success of these reforms. The next two years will provide many possible lessons, and it is faculty, staff, administrators, and students who will help inform successful implementation and identify educational best practices.
REFERENCES


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REVIEW OF FLOWER DARBY AND JAMES M. LANG’S SMALL TEACHING ONLINE: APPLYING LEARNING SCIENCE IN ONLINE CLASSES

CHRISTIAN AGUIAR

ABSTRACT

In their 2019 book Small Teaching Online, Flower Darby and James M. Lang present a model for online instruction that uses what the authors call the “small teaching” approach, which posits that college faculty should look for small, high-impact changes they can make to their teaching practice in place of wholesale overhauls. The authors explore the unique challenges that online learners struggle with, from feeling disengaged to feeling overwhelmed by the demands of self-directed learning, then offer practical, sustainable solutions for each. Their text thus offers helpful teaching practices both for new online teachers and veterans.


REVIEW

This past spring, higher education faculty across the world made an abrupt transition from traditional in-person classes to remote teaching online. Moving forward, we cannot be certain how long higher education will remain primarily online, but it is a safe bet that higher education will make greater use of online teaching – whether fully-online, hybrid, or flexible remote – than it has ever been before. In this uncertain context, Flower Darby and James M. Lang’s (2019) book Small
Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes provides a helpful guide for all faculty in improving and sustaining effective online teaching practice.

The text is an adaptation of Lang’s 2016 book Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning and provides the same core insight as Lang’s original text: rather than make sweeping overhauls of one’s approach to teaching each time a new trend emerges, we would do better to heed Aristotle’s famous advice and inculcate our teaching practices, like our virtues, through small actions we take each day. The authors offer practical strategies for achieving this – several of which are presented below – supported by research into learning, cognition, and student success. Perhaps their most important insight for online teaching is viewing student engagement not as an additional element that supports learning, but rather as the primary consideration for effective online learning. This is in large part because online learning has much higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses – “at least 10-20 percent higher” – that we must actively work to counter (p. 134).

First, Darby and Lang tackle the challenges presented by online course design, exploring the importance of backward design, intentional learner engagement, and appropriate use of online tools. The most important principles here are the same as applied to face-to-face classes: design assignments with the final destination in mind, communicate clearly to students both the directions for an assignment and its role in their learning, scaffold learning so that students make steady progress, and provide frequent feedback. The authors emphasize that in online learning environments, it becomes particularly important for faculty to “provide a clear rationale for the work [that] students will do, as well as clear directions for how they can accomplish it successfully” (p. 15). They make the case that effective instructors tend to do this almost unconsciously when in the classroom, but must do so more consciously when teaching online.
They offer two strategies: first, instructors can present assignments using a simple what/why/how framework, which clearly states what students will learn by completing the activity, why that is important, and how they will do it; second, instructors can offer regular opportunities for students to reflect on what they’ve learned, perhaps through discussion board posts. The authors also suggest faculty help foster autonomy by creating assignments with multiple options for completion: perhaps discussion board assignments with several question options which can foster “multiple mini-conversations,” or perhaps the option for students to complete an assessment through either a paper or a video (p. 164).

Instructors would do well to remember that online learners use backward design too: students may look at final assessments and then complete only the work they deem necessary to do well on that coursework. Rather than penalize students for this kind of strategizing, we could help them do it better: the authors recommend using short videos – they suggest six minutes or so – paired with credit-bearing response questions is ideal. This gives students a clear purpose for watching the video while also building in another opportunity for assessment. The videos themselves, the authors suggest, do not need to be elaborate: indeed, low-tech videos recorded from a webcam have the benefit of increasing engagement by making “you and your video authentic,” an element often missing from polished online courses (p. 54). Online learners benefit from reminders that their professor is a human. Not only does this make the course more engaging, but it offers a subtle reminder that students can reach out for help.

Directly related to this, Darby and Lang suggest that instructors look at the online environment itself from a student perspective: without extra effort, course shells can become cold, clinical spaces. Transforming e-mail announcements into videos, scheduling or offering video conference appointments, or recording audio responses to discussion board posts can all help
students engage with faculty. Indeed, the authors emphasize that small, simple interventions like recorded audio comments, which are fully integrated into most LMSs (including Canvas) help increase student engagement.

These interventions are all what the authors title “small teaching,” but instructional faculty should also look for larger, systemic inequalities in their courses. Students take online courses for many reasons, including a variety of socioeconomic barriers that make on-campus courses untenable. Instructors can better support students by ensuring courses are designed to accommodate non-academic challenges and barriers to success. The authors suggest flexible grading systems, such as the “oops token,” which allows students an opportunity to submit one assignment late, revise an assignment with which they struggled, or otherwise make up for a mistake (p. 99). These systems build a certain humanity into the online course experience.

It is particularly important when adapting course shells designed by instructional designers to adjust content to be culturally competent. The authors push beyond this by making the case that online instructors must work particularly hard to be culturally competent in their practices due to the permanent, public nature of the platform. For example, a microaggression left unaddressed on a discussion board quickly becomes an “archive” for the duration of the course; instructors must be mindful that virtual spaces are inclusive and that doing so will require more than simple adherence to a blanket institutional policy statement: it will require modeling, moderation, and potentially individual interventions, all of which may take more effort in the online environment.

While Darby and Lang’s text provides dozens of individual strategies to address the various components of online learning, the most important strategy is, without a doubt, the emphasis on small interventions. Whether the reader is new to online teaching or more experienced, the greatest improvements will come not from massive pedagogical overhauls, but rather from implementing
one or two new, manageable innovations this fall and then perhaps one or two more in the spring. Just as we must treat our online students with compassion, so must we treat ourselves in learning, adapting, and growing our teaching practices.

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NEW HORIZONS SHOWCASE

This year’s New Horizons conference, the premier annual teaching and learning event of Virginia’s community colleges, was cancelled due to the rapid spread and impact of COVID-19. This year’s conference theme Imagine the Possibilities encouraged the nearly 1,000 college faculty, staff, and administrative leaders statewide to share and engage in innovations, technological findings, pedagogical strategies, and creative solutions in and out of the classroom to improve equity and promote student success.

What we could not have expected was that teachers, researchers, and professionals across the Virginia Community College System would be imagining the possibilities of a new reality for higher education, one in which socially distanced, online and Zoom-based teaching and learning replaced traditional forms of communication and interaction. As a means of capturing this vital conversation and the originally intended conference presentations, those whose proposals were accepted to participate at New Horizons were solicited to share their findings in a special Inquiry showcase.

The following showcase works by Lauren Foster, Melissa Stange, and Matthew “Seth” Helmandollar seek to keep our New Horizons tradition alive virtually and sustain conversations about problem-based learning, preparation for students entering digital era careers, and the implementation of Canvas in student coaching and advising, respectively.

We hope that this glimpse into the conference stimulates discussion and encourages readers to pursue their own scholarship, research, and exchange of ideas in future issues of Inquiry as well as New Horizons conferences.
PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING: CONNECTING SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY WITH SERVICE LEARNING AND “REFLECTION”

LAUREN FOSTER

English Faculty. Germanna Community College
PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

• In this presentation I aim to illustrate and discuss the following:
  – the *principles* of Problem Based Learning (PBL)
  – *sociocultural theory (SCT)* in relation to PBL
  – how *Service Learning* is an important aspect to PBL and Sociocultural Theory

I will add some thought into the research for carving out space for “Reflection” and how these fields are interrelated and interdisciplinary.

Lastly, I will highlight the ways in which *Composition Studies and Technical Communication* incorporate these concepts already and where more work can be done moving forward.
HAS THIS EVER BEEN YOU IN A CLASS LECTURE?

(corgiadventures, 2011)
WHAT IS PBL?

ARGUMENTS AND OBJECTIVES:

• PBL is all the *buzz* right now, primarily due to its ability to actively engage students and researchers in the learning process by allowing them to solve real-world problems through collaboration and research.

• The *goal* of PBL is achieved through global topics presented by the teacher (facilitator); students then examine cases and/or real-world problems by bringing their own set of knowledge, exploring new ideas, and collectively sharing new knowledge to reflect and respond upon.

• PBL can also take students outside of the classroom through service-learning. This experience helps to examine different sociocultural settings.

• PBL has the same potential for researchers in the field of technical communication. In this presentation, I will highlight how.
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<td>What do you know?</td>
<td>What do you want to learn?</td>
<td>What did you learn?</td>
<td>Reflect upon your findings</td>
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<td>Students bring their own knowledge of the topic and apply their critical thinking skills to the collective group.</td>
<td>Through assessment, discussion, and experiment; students decide what they want to learn. This generates questions and critical thinking.</td>
<td>Students form answers and solve problems by applying connected knowledge, socio-cultural influences, and results.</td>
<td><strong>KWL+R=KWLR</strong> Reflection is an important aspect to add. It couples well with Service Learning, as researched by James Dubinsky.</td>
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<td>From there students begin to research and apply their own knowledge to solving problems</td>
<td>It applies individual knowledge with growth to formulate further research and change to make the world a better place.</td>
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HOW DOES IT ALL CONNECT?
INTERDISCIPLINARY
WHY PBL COMBINED WITH SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY, SERVICE LEARNING, AND REFLECTION?

- The idea of student-centered learning, as shown in PBL, when presented with real-world problems most likely will enhance global perspectives and awareness and deepen and enrich a student’s cognitive development.
- Through a repetitive nature of PBL, instructors scaffold students’ learning and their cognitive abilities begin to increase.
- Through service learning and reflection, students can begin to influence and change the world around them.
PBL CONNECTS TO SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS

- Students should be presented with real-world problems in order to connect to various sociocultural aspects.
- Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978) highlights that learners who are entrenched in different sociocultural contexts advance their cognitive development. This is enhanced through social interactions.
- “The social dimension of consciousness (i.e. all mental processes) is primary in time and fact. The individual’s dimensions of consciousness is derivative and secondary” (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 30)
- Authentic engagement versus pseudo-problems allows for organic, cognitive, and inter-connected agency of thought, brainstorm, and research.
- Facilitators play a vital role by engaging a student’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) through support and presentation of real-world problems.
- “Vygotsky’s conception of what an individual can accomplish when working in collaboration with others (more) versus what he or she could have accomplished without collaboration with others (less)” (Zuengler, J., Miller, E., 2006, pp. 38-39).
INFLUENCES AND INCORPORATING SERVICE LEARNING PEDAGOGY

• James Dubinsky in *The Role of Reflection in Service Learning* (2006) discusses the importance of reflection on service learning and experiences. This reflection can often adjudicate a need for a social change from a PBL presented real-world problem.

• Through service learning activities, students can assess the community around them and through observation and discussion, they can define a real-world problem to address.

• Through reflections of those experiences, students can take the beginning steps to social change.

• Dubinsky urges educators to schedule reflections often and in various formats.
WRITING “WITHIN THE REAL WORLD”
A SPACE FOR COMPOSITION STUDIES AND
TECHNICAL WRITING STUDIES

• Combining the practices of PBL, Sociocultural Theory, service learning and reflection lends way to an emerging space within Composition Studies and Technical Writing Studies. This combination of inquiry and research defies the confines of limited social and cultural research.

• It allows the exploration and “big” thinking to happen.

• We have seen with Angela Haas’ critical race studies in technical communication and in Carolyn Rude’s framework with mapping research questions on Technical Communication or in Natasha Jones’ research in rhetorical narratives in black entrepreneurs.

• These examples within Technical Communication and Professional Writing begin to carve out the space for “Reflection,” which can shape the ethics and future of tech comm. It is an interdisciplinary approach with great potential.
WHAT NEXT?

- Connections and Inquiry...
- Problem Based Learning, Sociocultural theory, and service learning and reflection have ties to some of the research in Second-language acquisition (SLA), through Vygotsky and the four foundational pillars of education (UNESCO, 1993).
- Composition Studies and Technical Communication and Pedagogy. Ethics and Sociocultural Theory and future research, for example in education, health care, human-centered design...

PATHS...

- Still need to research ...
- How is Critical Theory connected to PBL?
- How can research in classroom discourse analysis include PBL?
- Pedagogy practices in PBL and differentiated learners, such as SLA and disability rhetoric?
- Carve out more space in Composition studies for combining these theories into pedagogical practices.


PREPARING STUDENTS FOR DIGITAL ERA CAREERS

MELISSA STANGE, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss why technical skills alone will not be enough for students to have successful careers in the digital age. Much of their success will hinge on critical soft skills, such as adaptability, inner strength, holistic thinking, and a collaborative spirit. Examples will be provided for inclusion with a computer science program, but in a way that is easily adaptable to other disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation trends refers to the transformation activities, processes, competencies and models used to improve outcomes (Roe, 2018). According to 3700 executives nationwide, only 44% believe that their employees are ready for any possible disruptions (Kane, 2016). Of this group, only 18% stated that technological skills were the most important skill, most want forward thinking, change-oriented mindset, leadership, and collaborative skills (Kane, 2016). These are key skills that sometimes are forgotten in the scramble to ensure technical ability. Simply put — we need to ensure our technology graduates are successful by ensuring they are prepared with these soft skills.

My industry experience, diverse educational background, and experiences as an educator in computer science, cybersecurity, and information technology have allowed me combine technical competencies and industry soft skills into a unique learning experience in the classroom.
It is from my experience with this unique approach that I discuss the value of embedding soft skills within technical learning.

**WHY TEACH TECHNOLOGY WITH A SOFT SKILL PERSPECTIVE?**

Millennials and Generation Z’s have grown up in a digital environment; however, that does not mean that they embrace change and are equipped to navigate in an uncertain work world. Louise Morman, the Executive Director of the Lockheed Martin Leadership Institute in the College of Engineering and Computing at Miami University, states, “Technical skills alone won’t be enough for career success in the digital age. It’s much more than teaching people to code” (Morman, 2019). Therefore, educators must equip students with critical soft skills, adaptability, inner strength, holistic thinking, and a collaborative spirit to survive the fast-paced digital disruption within all industries. Today’s industry is quickly implementing more machine learning, deep learning, expert systems, security, decision systems, robotics, quantum computing, mobile and cloud technology; so everyone agrees that a technology graduate needs technical skills in these areas. Morman (2019) adds, “Employers are realizing more and more that career success hinges on critical soft skills — the things that computers don’t do as well as humans.”

While educators can talk about soft skills, students often do not learn them until applied to hands-on experiences. Chapman (2020) writes, “Soft skills are personal traits or attributes that can enhance interpersonal communication and be used in a multitude of ways, ranging from defusing conflict to motivating others.” The approach used with the Computer Science (CS) program at Lord Fairfax Community College for the last couple of years is known as AEHC (Adaptability, Evolved, Holistic, and Collaboration) mindset, in order to make sure CS graduates are competent technologists.
**Adaptability Is Critical**

Adaptability is a critical soft skill to ensure that students can adjust to the ever-changing work schedules, operation procedures, deadline changes, and innovative technology improvements. As Chapman (2020) states, “Employees with high adaptability are better equipped to take on new tasks, learn new technologies, and develop new proficiencies, all skills that provide positive benefits to companies working to keep up with the changing times.” Being adaptable will also improve a student’s ability to think fast and problem solve as they are confronted with changes that they had not planned for initially. Adaptability instills the mindset that it is all right to make mistakes and know how to apply the knowledge gained by the mistake to improve the process in the future.

Often professors provide students a schedule of course topics and homework assignments within the syllabus with due dates and the professor rigidly sticks to these posted dates and activities. In industry though, plans change and often product delivery dates go out the window for unexpected reasons or additional tasks go on an existing order. If students have not experienced these simulations of change, how can they understand adaptability? In short, they cannot! To help students experience and learn to adapt, professors can simply adjust a due date, add an additional requirement to an already posted assignment, or switch team members’ roles around, allowing enough time for the assignment to still be completed. In addition to adaptability challenges by initial course plan modification, educators should consider textbooks that include industry case studies that demonstrate adaptability in the specific discipline. By providing these extra challenges to students, we are making them more comfortable with uncertainty, allowing them to work in unstructured environments, teaching them to embrace change when it is not their idea, and teaching how to learn from failure.
Evolving the Community College Student through Awareness

Community colleges play a vital role in society. They provide a welcoming learning environment for learners from high school age to elderly. Self-awareness is a critical aspect within the evolving student. Self-awareness is about understanding our own needs, habits, and everything else that makes us unique. The more we know about yourself, the better we are at adapting to life's changes. Srivastava (n.d.) writes, “Research shows that self-awareness is directly related to both emotional intelligence and success.” Closely related to self-awareness is mindfulness, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as “a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts…” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). Evolving means one must also practice humility, which keeps one in touch with the reality that much is unknown to us in our lives. Rick Hensley, an executive with Messer Construction, explains humility as what “makes for a more harmonious and collaborative work environment because people feel they can share their ideas without fear of being 'one-upped' or put down” (Baldoni, 2009). As a student evolves, they need to understand that conflict may occur whenever people disagree over values, perceptions, or ideas and while these differences may look, but they may actually trigger strong feelings or conflict. Instead of a student practicing conflict avoidance, they need to learn to embrace it to resolve it — otherwise the inability to do so will be their downfall.

Computer science students need to understand that conflict between software testers and developers is inevitable but mindful there is a responsibility to minimize the effect of conflict on development projects through communication, mutual respect, even social interaction (Cohen, Birkin, Garfield, & Webb, 2004). Andrade and Huang (2016) show that the use of various technologies for online students will improve their soft skills when working within virtual teams.
Some examples of assignments would be macro and microblogging, video conferencing, collaborative virtual worlds, and gaming. Through these virtual classroom experiences, CS students have shown improved communication skills with one another and are better able to complete assigned remote team tasks in a timely manner. Students are more comfortable with admitting mistakes, are more respectful when they find someone else has made a mistake, tend to focus on their team members strengths instead of the weakness, and embrace teamwork with a lightened up environment. I started co-presenting with students at conferences to help them not only get public speaking experience, but to learn to deal with peer feedback and to become more self-aware of themselves. Depending on the level of the student’s evolvement, select a conference that will be a positive learning experience. The Virginia Community College Association (VCCA) and the New Horizons Conference teams have both allowed students to co-present (Stange, Stange, & Buchanan, 2019). If the student is further evolved, then encourage discipline specific conferences to assist them in building their network in their field. I have traveled with students to Washington D.C; Shreveport, Louisiana; Portland, Oregon, and Boston for them to present at computer science and cybersecurity conferences (Stange, Stange, & Coffman, 2019).

**STRATEGIC THINKING IS EFFECTIVE AND VISIONARY**

Community College professors often says things like, “We are teaching students for jobs that have yet to be defined.” If that is true, how can education actually do that? The answer is by guiding students to be creative, strategic, big picture, system thinkers with a little openness to endless possibilities. Jo Alice Blondin, the President of Clark State Community College, explains that, “community colleges can extend beyond skills training in their workforce development programming. Holistic workforce development can also create significant positive results for the community and economy” (Blondin, 2020). Strategic thinkers have the ability to do the following:
• use the logical and creative sides of their brain
• think with a strategic purpose while creating a visioning process
• clearly define their objectives and develop a strategic action plan
• design flexibility with a benchmark review progress
• recognize internal and external clues
• commit to lifelong learning
• learn from each of their experiences
• be non-judgmental (Center for Simplified Strategic Planning, Inc., n.d.) (Bowman, 2019):

Often students are so focused on the disciplines higher education uses to define their career direction. For example, one may be enrolled in an accounting program but enjoy computer science but they are unable to see how the two can work together in careers like forensic accounting because professors often do not provide examples of cross-discipline careers. I often bring in speakers who are working in one discipline, but were initially educated in computer science such as physical therapists, neo-scientists, biochemists, and marketing directors. Students are often amazed to find out how the concepts of one discipline carry over into another. A customer focused project that CS students at Lord Fairfax Community College have enjoyed to help them learn to be more system thinkers is by participating in virtual exchanges. The first time it was with students in Jordan to solve a global sustainability project for the tourism industry in both countries (Stange & Stange, 2020) and another time it was with a cybersecurity program in Ireland to develop a bot that assisted the visually impaired to design avatars for the Second Life application. These were holistic learning with hands-on application development.
COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT AND INTELLIGENCE TO PROMOTE PROBLEM SOLVING

When a student develops a collaborative spirit and intelligence, they demonstrate their passion and heart for their chosen discipline as well as their community. Providing students opportunities to participate in community service and outreach fosters the spirit of responsibility to others. It also provides student an opportunity to problem solve spontaneously as they have to think on their feet, as they become the teacher to the community (Stange & Coffman, 2019). Faculty can be collaborative role models to students by collaborating with local industry on projects and internships. Through this collaboration, students are empowered to solve problems, troubleshoot research, consult other professionals, and complete real-world tasks putting their classroom knowledge to the test (Stange & Coffman, Providing Students hands-on experiences and volunteerism through Community, 2018). Some faculty expect students to come into their classrooms with a passion, but passion is not necessarily inherent, but rather cultivated (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). This cultivation occurs by observation, participation, overcoming fear, working with peers, and openness to learning and failure.

While this approach design was with Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z’s (Gen Z) in mind, it can aid any students who assume they will have clear directions and expectations given to them always. All disciplines, but specifically technology programs, must stop focusing solely on technical competencies and start focusing on the student’s adaptability, evolvement, holistic, and collaboration mindset to ensure their students will be successful in the workforce.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Melissa Stange has served as a faculty member in Virginia and West Virginia since 2004 and is currently the Lead Professor for the Computer Science program, and she enjoys teaching transfer-oriented as well as career and technical education courses in Computer Science, Cybersecurity, and Information Technology. She is currently serving as the Virginia Community College System’s Technology Peer Group lead, as a member of the ACM CCECC committee, and on the Career and Technical Education Advisory Committee for Frederick County Virginia Public Schools. She is also an ABET Program Evaluator for CAC Cybersecurity programs. Melissa earned her Ph.D. in Applied Management and Decision Science from Walden University with a dissertation topic of "A Limited Assessment of the Curricula of Selected Information System Technology Associate Degree Programs," M.B.A. degree in Business Administration from Averett University, M.S. in Computer Science from Nova Southeastern University, B.S. in Computer Information Systems from Shenandoah University, and an A.A.S. degree in Data Processing from Chattahoochee Valley Community College. Melissa's research interests include game-theory, HCI, AI, and curriculum development for learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dysgraphia.
MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

MATTHEW SETH HELMANDOLLAR

ABSTRACT

As a success coach, it can be challenging in identifying and referring students to the resources that can aid, and that can assist with each student’s success during their first year. It is vital to use modern technological resources that are available at no additional cost to institutions, and which students are currently using, to aid in consistency within the field of academic advising and coaching as it pertains to a student’s first year. It engages students to reach out to faculty mentors to provide a “holistic” approach to the student’s success on the campus and meets students where they are via their learning management system. Included is information and feedback obtained through the National Academic Advising Association’s summer institute faculty regarding the usage of technological resources to provide a successful student experience. An overview of the creation and implementation of Canvas to perform the institutions’ advising objectives to create consistency in advising and coaching across campuses, especially in a time in which technology is a requirement as a result of the 2020 SARS-CoV-19 viral pandemic that ceased main campus and offsite campus operations for the remainder of the academic year with potential impacts to the proceeding academic year going forward.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Students in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) require equitable and equal treatment among their peers regardless of their past higher education experience, lack thereof,
and their demographics. While I work with all populations of students regardless of these factors, my specialization is in coaching non-traditional students. The common narratives among students in this population are, “I am too old to return to school” or “It is too late for me to consider going back to school because I have other responsibilities.” I became a non-traditional success coach in October 2018 after prior experience in areas of recruitment, retention, and student activities on Southwest Virginia Community College’s campus. This was a classification of students whom I identified and empathized with through my own experiences as a coach and non-traditional student. The term “non-traditional” was also a term I detested as it began to serve as a potentially negative label in discussions. A dictionary will describe the prefix “non” as an English formative word meaning “not” as well as negating and acknowledging the opposite or lack of its root word. Tradition can be defined as something customary over a period of time.

To help me further define and understand the challenges of non-traditional students, I began to view the proposed challenges of service provision through the viewpoint of Dr. William Glasser.

Glasser was a psychiatrist who broke from the traditions of psychotherapy with the often perceived abrupt and confrontational “Reality Theory” or “Choice Theory.” Within this extensive theory, Glasser refers to “paralysis of analysis,” which simply stated, means that if one does nothing to change a circumstance, the circumstance itself will not change as a result (Sala, 2009, p. 23). I acknowledged that a focus needed to shift in the status quo of success coaching provision to a modern and adaptive form of success coach service provision. The introduction of the learning management system, Canvas in 2019, brought with it an introduction to the possibility of the provision of such success coaching services for me to provide to students.

Although I was moving forward with updating my coaching practices, unfortunately, with the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, the state community colleges were required to
transition to online service provision. Fortunately, this did not affect the success coaching service provision to students as there was already an online presence on each students’ Canvas dashboard by each student services coach at Southwest Virginia Community College to pilot with their group of students. This includes students otherwise labeled as “traditional.” In this paper, I will discuss the effectiveness of Canvas as a primary tool for student outreach and EAB Navigate as a supplemental tool.

**A NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO REACH NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

I began to notice discrepancies in the ability to provide equitable and equal success coaching to a student sitting directly across from me in an office, and to a student who needed assistance strictly through alternative, formats such as phone calls, emails, and video conferencing. Simple tasks such as obtaining a signature required much more effort on behalf of the virtual student, and the student’s willingness or ability to communicate challenges did so as well.

One of the primary challenges for students is transportation. Though it is a wonderful scenic tour in the seasons of transition such as spring and fall, Southwest Virginia’s rugged terrain and mountainous roadways can easily make a simple twenty-five-mile drive to main campus an hour-long excursion depending on location and road conditions. These students may lack an ability to drive and public transportation to campus requires a student to be at a bus stop in the early morning hours such as 5:00 am, and these students are not retrieved from campus until 4:30 pm that afternoon. Many of the students in this population work a job that falls within the daily operational schedule of the campus or they work nightshifts that inhibit their daytime activity; therefore, students see a virtual medium for higher education as an only option.
Throughout pursuit of my own higher education as a non-traditional student, I acknowledged the hardships that a student of this status can face. The term “non-traditional” refers to an individual who did not transition directly into higher education upon graduation from high school and/or an individual, by Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) standards, that is age twenty-one years or older. As I struggled to identify a pathway that met my needs as an individual, I found solace in an online learning environment. In the beginning, I was in a classroom full of students I did not know, and I found it very difficult to relate to the people sitting around me, despite only taking one year between high school and college. The hardships were met with additional struggles that accompanied a first-generation college student and the uncertainty of a program or career pathway.

Throughout my continued educational experience there has been one phrase that has been uttered in each course: “Meet your client where they are.” My clients were students, and I noted that there was a need to meet them where they were. Unfortunately, our campus lacks specified success coaching for students who are solely virtual in their learning, and these students are introduced as part of a mixed cohort of students who are on the main campus, students who are learning in a hybrid manner of seated and online courses, and students who are exclusively online. I noted that unconventional means of service provision called for unconventional means of success coaching provision.

**Creating a Success Coaching Canvas Experience**

After attending the summer advising summit in 2019 in Lexington, Kentucky, of the National Academic Advising Association, I gained further insight into the importance of determining the effectiveness of services through assessment and ensuring each student was
being served. After discovering the beneficial features of the learning management system, Canvas, I have viewed the system as a means of achieving both an equitable and equal method of achieving the intrusive advising aspect by being where their courses were and providing an ongoing presence in the first year of all students in the cohort regardless of their learning format. It also provided an easier methodology to meeting the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) grant’s guidelines of providing a semester-long, orientation-like experience, providing partnership and collaboration with other campus services such as peer tutoring and career services, as well as career assessments to aid students in program selection. The mobile-friendly application provided students with smartphone devices access regardless of their location depending upon cellular connectivity and carrier plans.

I began by creating a student survey to determine student interest and student needs. Within this student needs survey, I asked questions pertaining to the students’ preferred contact methods, the schedule of courses that fits the students’ schedule, the desire to transfer, and so on. It contained approximately twenty questions that were subjective to student opinion. I created the survey with the idea that minimalism is key. I noted students were more likely to answer survey questions if those surveys were less than ten minutes. Additionally, Canvas contains quick access links for individuals in the creator’s view giving me the opportunity to gain a broader insight into the lives of the individuals in the cohort.

I included RVHI grant obligations such as career assessments in an online friendly format and included the opportunity to discuss the results upon submission. The Canvas Pages feature was utilized to incorporate important documents and information, the Discussions feature was utilized to encourage peer-to-peer interactions as well as to provide a thread for general questions and concerns, the Announcements feature was utilized to inform students of important
information and important campus events, the Modules feature was used to compile all the tasks together in an easy-to-read and organized format.

A soft launch of the Canvas shell titled “Your Personal Success Coach” was piloted in the late 2018-2019 academic year with low participation rates. Hypotheses surrounding the reasoning for this was the late implementation, as the RVHI initiative was not staffed until October 2018, as well as a lack of incentive for completion of the items listed within the shell. The 2019-2020 Canvas shell was made active in August of 2019 and will remain active until May 2020. Included in this re-launch is a token economy system within the Canvas shell. Thus, the most popular feature has been the inclusion of the third-part application “Badgr” to award badges for completion of each task included in the modules with over 160 badges awarded to students for completion of various tasks after the Fall 2019 semester, thus indicating an increase in participation rates in terms of awarded badges and Canvas analytics for the academic year provided by the Canvas learning management system.

Pages

Canvas contains a “Pages” feature that is available for the import of important documents such as the health care program of study requirements, links to the programs’ applications, information on local county free tuition scholarship options, information on graduation such as how and where to complete the application, and transfer and career services information such as articulation agreements with the Virginia Community College system and other four-year institutions in and out-of-state. Students cited the most beneficial feature of the Pages link on the Canvas application was the inclusion of a sample essay in both MLA and APA formatting, links to offsite resources to aid in formatting such essays with in-text citations, and other relevant
information. The “Home” page was an overview of the description of the presence of the Canvas shell on the students’ dashboard, as well as contact information for the student to be able to reach my office regarding needs, questions, or concerns.

Other features within the “Pages” link include a map of campus and the services that reside in each building. This was designed and put into place to aid students that were in hybrid courses to navigate campus, as well as online students who needed to navigate the physical campus to complete an assignment on the main campus such as an exam or a face-to-face meeting with a faculty or staff advisor. Forms were created via Google Forms to include questions such as what was the student’s biggest achievement for the month? What obstacles did the student face in that month? What obstacles did the student overcome in the previous month? It also included feedback questions in which the student could provide feedback on how their personal success coach could aid them in overcoming these obstacles and moving forward in the next month. This allowed me to take an individualized approach to each student’s needs as they were brought to my attention throughout the academic year.

Discussions

Canvas contains a “Discussions” feature. Initially, discussions began with one forum in which students could post any general questions or concerns they may have with the disclaimer against releasing personal information in the process of doing so. However, concerns arose about possible FERPA violations. Discussion forums are set up to send notifications to the Canvas course administrator so that if an instance would occur, it could immediately be removed. Fortunately, this has not had to occur. I was personally taken by surprise at the initiative that the other students were taking within the Canvas shell. Other students who posted general questions
received answers from their peers in the discussion forum, thus promoting peer-to-peer interaction. While unforeseen, it has proven effective in promoting communication skills and allowing students who know the answer to another student’s question to provide feedback to that student in a response to the thread.

**Announcements**

The “Announcements” feature of the Canvas learning management system provided effective outreach to the students enrolled in it. I was able to communicate important information to students such as deadlines regarding registration, withdrawal dates, as well as other important information such as the availability of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This information appeared in the students’ Canvas Inbox feature as well as their student email address to ensure the students were contacted. These messages remain visible to the students throughout the academic year until the course is concluded at the end of the students’ first years. It allowed for notification of campus events to increase student engagement on the main campus and allowed for a medium of contact about such events and other important information after the unfortunate SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, which moved all students to an online format for the remainder of the semester.

After the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, there was little required to transition such services online. As a matter of fact, it gave the Canvas course more solidarity to the acknowledgment for the need for such services in that there was little effort to make the transition with students as the coaches’ presences were already online on Canvas alongside the other courses. It also brought attention to the course on Canvas to students who were strictly
face-to-face originally but had to make the transition to online upon closure of the main campus and its offsite locations.

**Canvas Inbox**

Students were able to communicate directly with their coaches through the Canvas “Inbox” feature located universally across all courses. Students utilized this feature to request appointments for upcoming registration, inquire about general information such as deadlines and other important dates to remember or to convey any concerns they may have regarding their courses. Coaches utilized this platform to send out encouraging messages to students to remind them of the ongoing presence of the students’ Canvas application of their MySouthwest portal. These messages were sent through the “Inbox” feature to the inbox of the other student or coach; however, the messages also went to the student or coach via the student email for the students and the college-assigned email for the success coach. This served to ensure an additional level in the modality of outreach to students.

**Badgr: Badge Awarding System**

“Badgr” is a third-party application that can be integrated directly into the Canvas shell. Within it, students can receive badges created by the success coach for each assignment and/or module therein. This token economy provided students with an incentive to complete career assessments, participate in intrusive advising services, and provide self-encouragement. Badgr also allows the student to partake in their own educational experience to perhaps learn more about themselves as a result of such assessments and activities.
“Badgr” includes with it a leaderboard option for institutions wishing to award a student with the most badges without giving insight as to the leading student. The application assigns an alias to each student on the leaderboard. Students are not aware of who has completed each task to earn the reward. Tasks include but are not limited to completing the FAFSA for the upcoming academic year, completing career assessments and reflecting on the results, community engagement and community service, as well as connection with faculty mentors for their programs of study to ease transition after the students’ first years of school. This not only made the experience enjoyable for students, but it also provided analytics for use in quarterly and annual RVHI reports.

**Incorporation of EAB Navigate**

EAB Navigate was implemented at Southwest Virginia Community College in the latest wave of release. This served as an extra connection to the students as it allowed for pulling of reports that coaches would otherwise be unable to access through the Canvas application (i.e., reports pertaining to students enrolled for the fall term but not the spring term). It allowed the coach to place a personal tag on the student’s Navigate profile and compile them into a list for reporting purposes and additional outreach through the text messaging feature, thus increasing the number of methods that students could be reached. It provided a medium for the coach to reach out in times of indicated cases with students that were tagged as part of the cohort of the coach, as each coach was notified of when a student was flagged by a faculty member for various reasons such as low participation, excessive absences, and if the student was in danger of failing the course.
Reporting and Analytics

Per the requirements of the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) grant, coaches are required to complete quarterly reporting on students served by their program. Canvas provided these statistics with ease as it provided reporting on completion rates of each task placed into the Canvas shell such as completion rates for the career assessment, student engagement and participation, and overall effectiveness of student outreach garnered from reports on student usage and presence within the Canvas shell itself with one click of a button.

In the shell, there is a button that says “Review Course Analytics” in which coaches receive a breakdown of activity rates throughout the semester or academic year. Activity is arranged every week based on the course’s set start date. As identified in figure one below, overall page views for the academic year reached over 5,600 at its initial pilot once the cohort was established in September 2019, and continues to garner an average of 806 page views per week as of May 2020 marking the ending of the spring 2020 term and the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. The Canvas course will not be concluded until mid-May 2020 to provide assistance as needed to students during the final exam period of the semester. The coach can review the number of page views each student has made throughout the semester or academic year.
INITIAL PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS FROM FALL 2019

Overall, 25% of the individuals in the cohort responded, and over 80% of those respondents in the 2019-2020 cohort had parents that completed high school, with less than 20% coming from homes where one or both parents did not graduate. Of these, less than 40% reported higher education upon completion. Over half the students wished to enter the workforce directly after graduation with an equal number of respondents reporting employment currently. Students indicated the preferred contact method was to be emailed at 75% and receive text messages at 57%. There was consistency in reports of student email inbox reviews ranging from one to three times per week through one to two times per day. Many students had never utilized student services such as Workforce Development Services, Career Services, and peer tutoring.

Usage of these analytics includes determining overall completion rates of one-year programs of study, graduation rates for the conclusion of the fall term for students who are in
one-year programs which began in Summer 2019, as well as for future data analysis when the course is concluded with this cohort in mid-May 2020. This will allow for outreach efforts to continue to students in two-year programs of study who have not enrolled for the following semester and to determine the completion rate of one-year programs of students that began in Fall 2019. Congratulatory letters are sent to each student listed on the graduation applicant list upon receipt after each semester.

**OVERALL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION**

Based on the research conducted using Canvas as the primary medium and later Navigate as a secondary medium for outreach and success coaching, I was able to coach students in all methods of learning including seated instruction, hybrid instruction, and online instruction. This provides an effective means of outreach to students who otherwise would fail to reach out. Canvas creates an ease of reporting strategies for quarterly or annual reports depending on division and/or grant requirements. It is unaffected by the transition in course instruction, as it is already in an online learning management system alongside the students’ other courses. It provides the student with an ability to interact with their coach by other means than through phone conversations or emails.

With effective collaborative usage between Canvas and EAB Navigate by the success coach, the use of the learning management system as a means of success coach service provision could be of benefit to all community colleges or universities regardless of location. Students with lack of transportation and students with lack of at-home internet services can use the mobile-friendly application on their smartphones, tablets, and other devices capable of connecting to a cellular network as well as carrier plans which would allow for the student to
download the application onto their phones and remain connected with their success coach at all times.

Further study is needed to determine the effectiveness of the provision of success coaching services through this medium. Once a 2020-2021 cohort can be established, an additional 200 students will be given the same opportunity to voice opinions and interact in the same ways as the cohorts in the past. Cross-comparison data will also be obtained over the next year among other coaching using the platform, as well as prior enrollment statistics to determine if there is a positive correlation between usage of this medium for success coaching and the past methods of providing such services before the learning management system, Canvas, was implemented.

Thus far, given the preferred method of contact for students and the collaborative efforts of using the Canvas and EAB Navigate applications appear to meet the needs of these individuals in that they provide all forms of contact: email, text message, and personal contact information for phone calls and postal mail. Both applications are also unaffected by obstacles such as the current SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19, as students were already aware of the presence of the Canvas system as well as making usage of it as evidenced by the chart of Fall 2019 participation rates. Additionally, the office of Institutional Research at Southwest Virginia Community College will also play a large role going forward in this project to review changes in student data and how current variables such as the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic has played a role in the trends seen throughout 2018 through 2021.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Helmandollar, a Non-Traditional Success Coach with the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative at Southwest Virginia Community College, has prior experience in areas such as recruitment and retention. After completing an A.A.&S. in General Studies: Psychology at Southwest Virginia Community College, he went on to complete a B.A. in Human Services and Counseling from Lindsey Wilson College. Seth is currently in pursuit of an M.Ed. in Counseling and Human Development at Lindsey Wilson College. With a heightened empathetic understanding for non-traditional students as a result of being one himself, he was also a first-generation college student. This provides for a heightened empathetic understanding for the students served.
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If you have any questions, please contact our Managing Editor Tom Geary, Ph.D. at tgeary@tcc.edu.