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EMBRACING A PORCUPINE: REDESIGNING A WRITING PROGRAM

ABSTRACT: *An evaluation of Quinnipiac College's precollege course for basic skills developmental students revealed the following inadequacies: poor student motivation and resistance, reductive cognitive opportunities, and fragmentation of reading and writing processes. This essay explains how faculty reconceptualized developmental English and designed a new program that provides additional instructional time within the regular freshman English course. Program assessment results indicate that developmental students are better motivated and achieve growth in reading and writing commensurate with students who had a prior semester of precollege English.*

"Why can't English be more than parts of speech? I know the instructor tried to make it interesting, but I wish I could have been in English 101. Even though my English skills are weak, at least give me a chance." The student who voiced this complaint was enrolled in English 100, a developmental reading and writing course at my school, Quinnipiac College. Here, writing program administrators and teachers are challenged to meet several demands beyond individual student complaints: improving student reading and writing, motivating students, upholding academic standards, and maintaining faculty morale, all the while being accountable to administration. Through careful site-specific evaluation, we have redesigned our program to satisfy all these demands.

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Quinnipiac College is a private four-year college with approximately 1,000 new freshmen placed in English courses based on their Verbal SAT scores, Nelson-Denny Reading Test reading grade level, and a holistically scored placement essay (adopted in 1991 to replace a standardized multiple-choice test). Students who fall below 390 on the SAT, who have a reading grade level of 12.9 or below on the Nelson-Denny, *and* have a combined score of 4 or below (out of a possible 8 on a four-point holistic ranking scale) are placed into developmental sections of freshman English. Our developmental English students have a mean SAT of 340, an eleventh-grade reading level, and a mean holistic score of 3.14. Typically, only eight percent of this developmental group have reading grade levels below tenth grade. In our original program (which ended three years ago), these students were required to take English 100, a noncredit course comprised of two components: (1) a two-hour reading lab with SRA. Rate Builders and a programmed vocabulary book and (2) a three-hour component of composition instruction with a basic grammar text and a rhetoric reader. Students who passed this course must then take our required sequence of English 101 and 102. When English 100, 101, and 102 were created in the early 1970s, much thought and effort went into designing a program that would meet the needs of underprepared students. However, as Mike Rose cautions, such courses can go awry:

> Many of our attempts to help college remedial writers, attempts that are often well-intentioned and seemingly commonsensical, may, in fact, be ineffective, even counterproductive, for these attempts reduce, fragment, and possibly misrepresent the composing process. ("Remedial" 318)

From several vantages, our English 100 course cried out for revision. A year-long evaluation (which included student and faculty surveys, follow-ups on graduating seniors, grade analyses, research, and consultation) led us to the following conclusions:

1. The syllabus and pedagogy for English 100 reflected a reductive, fragmented approach to reading and writing.

2. Little opportunity was provided through instruction or assignments to integrate reading and writing.

3. Students were often reluctant to participate in class and to complete their writing assignments.

4. Anonymous end-of-semester course evaluations revealed student resentment at not receiving academic credit for the course and at feeling like they were in "bonehead English."

5. Full-time faculty avoided teaching the course; one out of seventeen sections each semester was taught by full-time faculty.

6. Students argued vehemently against placement in English 100.

Life under the reign of English 100 caused administrative headaches, classroom apathy, and nagging questions about the mismatch of theory and praxis.

Justification for reconceptualization of our developmental writing program was abundant, and the literature in both reading and composition studies supported our perceptions. For example, Judith Irwin identifies the processes in which readers engage, illustrating the complexity of the reading process. Perhaps more pertinent, though, is Irwin's emphasis on what she terms the "interactive hypothesis" that reading processes "do not occur separately . . . that they occur almost simultaneously in no prespecified order, and that they interact with each other" (6). The complexity and the recursive nature of the composing process is well attested to in the writings of Bartholomae and Petrosky, Peter Elbow, Linda Flower, and Mina Shaughnessy, to name only a few. Our evaluation of English 100 illustrated a basic conflict between what we expected of our students in their academic reading and writing and what we were teaching them in our developmental course. A collegewide review of writing assignments indicated that faculty expected students to be able to synthesize, analyze, and criticize course readings and to position themselves and the readings in relation to the discipline. Our developmental classes were teaching students that reading and writing are unrelated, that vocabulary is not dependent on context, and that structure takes precedence over content in writing. Our old English 100 reinforced a tendency already present in incoming students to conceive of reading and writing as discrete formal tasks, which we further decontextualized by attending exclusively to surface and structural features.

I realize that the position I have taken so far is not a revelatory one for most readers, but the issues and debates that larger, open-admissions institutions have grappled with for years may be seen as radical by some smaller private colleges, such as mine. Perhaps one explanation can be found in Barbara Gleason's concession that while she finds most basic writing instructors emphasize invention and revision, the prevalence of such instruction is difficult to assess, since the more formal skills instructors are "less likely to publish than those with more progressive ideas" (888). Perhaps this is a result of housing writing programs within English departments whose literary specialists are, "pleasantly ensconced" and retain control of the "floating bottom" faculty who teach lower-level composition (MLA Commission Report 71), thus inhibiting progressive pedagogy from replacing the more traditional teaching modes. In 1992, Min-zhan Lu found "limited influence on basic writing instruction which continues to emphasize skills," and that "this view persists among basic writing teachers in the 1990s" (889). Lu focused on the usefulness of the anxiety generated "when reading and writing take place at sites of political as well as linguistic conflict" (888), but her position is applicable, regardless of student profile. Whether they come from differing cultural backgrounds or are culturally homogeneous, incoming developmental students all face the dissonance resulting from encountering academic discourse. How then to redesign developmental English programs to meet institutional and student needs, to support a better marriage of theory and praxis, to introduce underprepared students to academic discourse, and to achieve these aims in an atmosphere of respect and dignity for both student and teacher?

The Intensive Model

During our 1991 departmental evaluation, we reviewed descriptions of other freshman English programs and came upon one that seemed to meet the academic and social needs of our students. The program we found most admirable was the program at Illinois State University, in which developmental students enroll in a regular college-level English 101 composition course, but meet for additional instructional time in specially designated "Intensive" sections (Youga, et al. 58). This model seemed preferable to ours in several different ways. It allows students to stay abreast of their peers; through additional in-

structional time, weaker students have the support they need to succeed; and the typical English 101 syllabus is much more in keeping with actual academic demands. In addition, the Intensive course alleviates many administrative problems. Obviously, any blanket adoption of a program from one institution to another is unwise, but after careful consideration of institutional needs, resources, expectations, and student-competency levels, we found the Illinois "Intensive" program very appealing and adopted a modified version of it in 1992.

Our new syllabus for English 101 (three hours of instructional time) and for English 101 Intensive (five hours of instructional time) were the same, allowing students who passed the Intensive course to receive college credit and to enroll in English 102. We have found that student attitude and motivation have improved tremendously since the stigma of "bonehead" English has been removed. Further, students do not need to take English 102 over the summer in order to make up credits, nor do they need to pay additional tuition for a noncredit course. Our model differs from the Illinois model, which employs teaching assistants for the extra two hours in the Intensive course. We do not have graduate programs from which to draw teaching assistants, and our experience with team-teaching the reading and writing components of our old English 100 course was less than ideal. Moreover, we wanted to assure that the full five hours were used to the maximum by the same Master's-level professional who would be instructing and grading the students. Currently, our faculty uses the five hours in a flexible manner as the needs of the students dictate, varying from scheduled workshops, to individual conferences, to whole group instruction.

In contrast to our old English 100 syllabus, our English 101 syllabus is closer to reflecting the actual demands of academic discourse. By asking developmental students to engage in the same college-level discussions, to read from the same texts, and to respond to the same assignments as our three-hour 101 students, we provide rich opportunities for cognitive growth. To illustrate the contrast between our English 100 syllabus and the English 101 syllabus, the first asked students to study isolated vocabulary words while the latter invites students to define and to debate the meaning of words within the context of an essay from a college-level text. English 100 asked students to complete grammar and punctuation exercises from a handbook, while English 101 employs student drafts as texts for instruction in word choice and syntax. Perhaps the most salient con-

trast between the old and new syllabi is that the old one required students to read and write on unrelated topics, while our new one organizes reading and writing assignments selected for their thematic unity (e.g., power and control, censorship, campus issues, or self-esteem). The thematic approach of our new syllabus allows us to create an environment of sustained inquiry into an issue and to build reading and writing skills within the context of that inquiry. In this way, developmental students are invited to participate in synthesis, analysis, and critical debates missing from our old basic writing course.

Administrative Benefits

The Intensive model has administrative benefits as well. With a large adjunct faculty, we adopt the same text for all sections of English 101 and English 101 Intensive, to facilitate changes in staffing. Text selection is thus simplified since all sections of English 101 (whether regular or Intensive) use the same text. I do not mean to suggest that the time and consideration spent in text selection are any less important; in fact, they become more significant since the same text is used in all sections, and as such must contain readings and instruction that can be useful to all students. Since both groups use the same text, we can better assure comparable levels of instruction for both groups, that students can change sections more easily, that we have only one order to submit to the bookstore, and that faculty can teach both the three-hour and five-hour 101 sections without double preparation. Another administrative benefit is that staffing is further eased: We offer paired sections of English 101 (one section of three hours and one section of five hours) for which faculty receive additional compensation for the extra two hours. This pairing itself is useful to guard against grade inflation, a tendency when one teaches only Intensive sections. Lastly, students and parents are content with the possibility of college credit for English 101 Intensive and are generally grateful for the additional academic support. Complaints about placement testing have gone from dozens per semester to only a few.

Faculty Development

The adoption and success of any new program is dependent in large measure upon the support of the faculty and administration. To that end, faculty development and a sense of owner-

ship in the new program needed to be nurtured. The following efforts proved useful in achieving both ends: Faculty workshops on collaborative learning helped to familiarize faculty with alternatives to the traditional presentational mode of teaching. In *Research in Written Composition,* George Hillocks refers to the "environmental mode" which we found does indeed "bring teacher, student, and materials more nearly into balance" (247). Also useful were individual faculty-coordinator conferences (with full- and part-time faculty) for dealing with reservations about the new program, whether due to lack of familiarity with methodology or general resistance to change. Another way to smooth the transition between programs was to make available sample syllabi with various thematic approaches keyed to the selected text. These ready syllabi were often welcomed by novice faculty and by others who felt pressured by their own professional activities. Lastly, involvement of key administrators in the holistic scoring sessions for pre- and post-testing served not only to foster a sense of institutional investment in the new program, but also broadened our conversations about student writing. Through these scoring sessions, participants saw firsthand that developmental students could be very insightful but have problems with grammar, could turn a fine phrase but have nothing to say, or could see the complexity of an issue but could not organize their thoughts. In short, scorers began to rethink their notions of developmental writers and to appreciate the "rich and varied" nature of human cognition, as Mike Rose has illustrated ("Narrowing" 297).

Program Assessment

This past Spring, the end of the third year of our Intensive program, our evaluation indicates that the Intensive program has met, and in some ways, exceeded our expectations. We have tracked student grades, administered post-tests, and conducted student/faculty surveys, but before I wax euphoric about our assessment results, I believe a cautionary note on writing assessment is necessary. Assessment expert Edward White reminds us:

> Writing is in itself too complex and multifaceted to be measured in such a way [norm referenced exams or first draft essays]. The amount of improvement that can occur in so complex a skill in a few months is likely to be submerged by such statistical facts as regression to the mean or less than ideal reliability. A carefully designed

> essay test ought to be part of any composition program design: The more careful it is, the more likely it is to show the effects of instruction. But everyone involved in the evaluation should be aware of the strong odds against obtaining statistically meaningful results from this one instrument. Therefore, a simple pre-test/post-test model using actual writing scored holistically should never be the entire evaluation design. As part of the design, such a test has many beneficial effects and just might document the improvement that has taken place; as the whole design, the test is asked to carry more weight and more responsibility than it can well bear. (119-200)

Our post-essay exam did show progression in scores: .20 points for the non-Intensive group and .48 points for the Intensive group (on our four-point scoring scale); however, our exam is criterion-referenced and site-specific to Quinnipiac. Since we changed our testing instrument from a standardized multiple-choice exam to an essay exam, a statistical comparison of test scores is not possible; however, a comparison of English 101 grades of prior English 100 students and current Intensive students shows that the majority of Intensive students earned a grade of C or better in English 101. This is equivalent in grade distribution to prior English 100 students who were required to take English 100 before enrolling in English 101.

Table A, below, represents the grade distribution analysis for developmental students only. The 1991 and 1992 columns represent developmental students who had a prior semester of English 100 (the noncredit course). The 1993 to 1995 columns represent developmental students in English 101 Intensive with **no prior** English 100 course. We controlled for grade inflation by having coordinators score randomly selected exams and by assigning both an Intensive section and a non-Intensive section of English 101 to each instructor.

In a follow-up study of all student grades in English 102, we found that of those students who failed English 102 or who withdrew from the College, 44% were prior Intensive students, the remaining 56% nondevelopmental students.

Concluding Comments

The simultaneous implementation of the various components is necessary for a successful Intensive freshman writing

Table A
Grade Distribution Analysis
Developmental Grades in English 101
(Percent)

Grade	Academic Year				
	1991	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**
	{N=186}	[N=146]	[N=274]	[N=231]	[N=314]
A	.5	.7	3.6	.4	1.9
B	21.4	24.6	22.2	19.0	23.8
C	57.7	57.5	53.3	54.5	52.5
D	4.8	10.9	6.5	10.3	7.6
F	0	.7	0	0	0
Incomplete	0	0	12.4*	12.4*	12.4*
Withdrew from the College	13.4	2.7	1.8	3.0	1.5

* Note that beginning in 1993, the College adopted a new policy allowing any English 101 (both three-hour non-Intensive and five-hour Intensive) student not passing the course to receive an Incomplete and to repeat the entire course in the subsequent semester.

program: thematic curricula, faculty development, additional instructional hours, and a student population at a minimum level of competency. While I cannot claim that the Intensive program is a panacea, I can report that it has exceeded our expectations in addressing problems that so plagued us for years. Our students have shown significant improvement in motivation and output. Our faculty, though still not clamoring to teach developmental students, has demonstrated improved morale. Finally, without lowering institutional standards, we have observed student growth in reading and writing at least equal to the old program. Perhaps most significant, though, is the new sense of dignity with which the students approach their studies in freshman English.

Note

[1]The "environmental mode" is one of three modes defined by George Hillocks to describe approaches to teaching composition: The "presentational mode" relies on lecture and traditional teaching methods, and the "natural process mode" em-

ploys epistemological approaches including freewriting and student-centered activities. In his meta-analysis, Hillocks finds the environmental mode the most effective of the three modes because it "uses activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning problems parallel to those they encounter in certain kinds of writing" (247).

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