

Building Better Bridges: Understanding Academic Text Readiness at one Community College

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BACKGROUND

The college and career readiness movement and P-20 pipeline reform efforts have been catalysts for the development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). One of the major goals of the CCSSI has been to clarify standards beginning with what is considered college and career ready and then systematically backward-benchmarking each educational grade level through kindergarten (National Governors Association, 2010). A major component of these efforts is having students exit high school ready for the literacy expectations of the workplace or placement directly into college-level courses. Indeed this is a worthy effort as increasing numbers of first-year college students are being placed into developmental reading courses prior to beginning their college-level courses (e.g., Boatman & Long, 2010; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, & Magazinnik, 2013).

Although scholars in this area of policy and scholarship continue to carefully examine students' readiness levels as they prepare to transition from high school to college, little to no attention has been given to students' transitions at the postsecondary level from developmental education courses to general/occupational coursework. Thus, a study was designed to ascertain, through a curricular audit at one community college, whether and how the reading instruction—including text expectations and goals—within developmental reading (DR) courses aligned with the text expectations and goals for introductory-level, general education and occupational education (GE/OE) courses. Through a close examination of the academic literacy expectations for GE/OE courses as well as for DR courses, researchers were able to determine the alignment of skills, competencies, and faculty and student expectations across the target courses.

METHOD

This literacy audit was guided by the following overall questions:

1. What constitutes college-level text-readiness at this community college?
2. What are the text-expectations, including text types, tasks, and goals?
In developmental reading courses?
In general education courses?
In occupational education courses?
3. How do these text-expectations align?
4. What is the culture of reading at this community college?

The audit protocol was designed to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data sources and analysis approaches. The design reflects the need to gather information from a large number of faculty and students (via a web-based survey instrument) as well as more in-depth information from smaller samples (i.e., focus groups).

The focus on literacy expectations in the GE/OE courses provided information on the institutional expectations for text-readiness. The goal was to determine what the institutional definition of college text-readiness was by surveying, interviewing, and holding focus groups with faculty members across the college who teach introductory-level GE/OE courses. In addition, course materials were gathered from representative courses (e.g., course texts, syllabi, etc.), and targeted class sessions were observed to gather data on in-class text usage, textbook-reading strategy instruction, and discipline-specific literacy instruction. Simultaneously, the same data-gathering protocol was being employed in the DR courses.



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Another focal component focused on including the voices of students. Through an online survey, interviews, and focus groups, data were gathered on student perceptions of institutional literacy expectations, college-text-readiness needs, current DR preparation, and specific gaps felt in their own literacy transitions.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistical analysis (from the online survey), a qualitative analysis (for interview, focus group, and observation transcripts and field notes), document analysis (for all course artifacts), and a textbook readability analysis to determine any potential gaps in readability between texts used in DR and GE/OE courses. Analysis within individual data sources was followed by triangulation between and across data sources.

DELIVERABLES OF THE INITIAL AUDIT MODEL

To give a sense of the kinds of insights to be gleaned through application of such an audit model, the audit questions, including a few key findings, are included below.

What constitutes college-level text-readiness at this community college? Although faculty, both in DR and in introductory-level GE/OE courses, articulated specific expectations and identified particular student literacy strengths and weaknesses, it is clear that there is not a consistent, widely accepted definition of college-text ready at this institution. Some of the GE/OE faculty assume only that students should be able to read their college-level textbooks independently upon entry to their courses. However, others expect that students be ready for the specialized types of text practices (often discipline-driven) upon entry as there does not appear to be much discussion of this occurring in the introductory-level GE/OE courses.

What are the text-expectations, including text types, tasks, and goals? For the DR courses, two types of texts are predominant: workbook-style practice texts and novels. By contrast, in the GE/OE courses, more expository texts are used, including field-specific textbooks, and, in some disciplines, such as history, combinations of primary and secondary sources as well. Based on the data gathered, the text-associated tasks expected of students enrolled in DR courses appear to be largely geared toward basic comprehension checks. Reading guides, for example, provide students an opportunity to respond to specific questions about the novels to demonstrate understanding. In addition to these reading guides, there appears to be an emphasis on vocabulary-development tasks. By contrast, in the GE/OE courses, the tasks are far more likely to be quizzes and tests, with some text-supported essay assessments included in a few courses. The goal for students' use of texts in the DR courses was aimed at providing practice with identifying main ideas, developing vocabulary, and reviewing strategy use. By contrast, the goal for students' use of text in the GE/OE courses was mostly as a support, and in a few cases, a supplement to the instructor for learning the course content.

How do these text-expectations align? The answer to this question is that there is definitely a gap; however, this practical gap is caused by larger conceptual gaps. First, there is a potential mismatch between what is thought to be done and what is actually enacted in classrooms. Second, there is an overall conceptual gap, which is partly communication-based. Not only are faculty unclear on the purpose, scope, and goals of the DR courses, but so too are the students. Similarly, DR instructors may not be communicating with non-reading faculty to design curricula with a clear sense of what students will be faced with in their introductory-level GE/OE courses.

What is the culture of reading at this institution? The introductory-level GE/OE faculty are incorporating texts in their curricula; however, the extent to which the instruction is text-based or text-supported varies widely. Primarily, in the GE/OE courses, the focus of instruction is on the content, not the literacy practices (even in terms of disciplinary literacy practices). This indicates an expectation that students read at the literal/factual level, rather than at a deeper level of meaning. In addition, in some courses, the instructor lecture notes and PowerPoints are so rich that additional texts are deemed unnecessary.

References

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