

A New Focus on Interactive Learning at Community Colleges

In community college classrooms, the traditional emphasis on delivering content through lectures may become less prevalent as teachers find better ways to help students engage in college-level learning. While lecturing may still have a role, it has significant limitations, especially for students new to college and those at risk of faring poorly, says Jane Braunger, former Senior Research Associate with WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI).

New federal legislation making its way through Congress would add strength to Braunger's perspective by supporting the integration of basic skills teaching into regular content courses. The current bill, titled "The American Graduation Initiative," in the U.S. House of Representatives, supports "blending basic skills and occupational training" and integrating "developmental education" with "for-credit coursework."

"The challenge for community college teachers has been to rethink their approach and focus more on helping students read, think, and communicate with more facility in a particular discipline," says Braunger. Using SLI's Reading Apprenticeship approach, "many community college faculty have risen to the challenge."

Although Reading Apprenticeship was originally developed in 1995 for use in middle and high schools, the research-based approach has been introduced in recent years to growing numbers of community college teachers. Many have found their students to be underprepared for college-level work and have sought support from WestEd's SLI. In response, Braunger and colleagues have been providing professional development in Reading Apprenticeship to help community college instructors' ease their students' transition into college while boosting their academic success.


Making Learning Visible

Reading Apprenticeship embeds reading instruction within content learning. Teachers who use Reading Apprenticeship regularly engage students in metacognitive conversations — discussions that increase the students' awareness and understanding of how they read and think about what they read. Specifically, teachers model their own discipline-specific reading strategies.

"Teachers learn to 'unpack' their own reading and thought processes, making them visible to their students, in effect, their apprentices," explains Braunger.

For example, a history teacher using the Reading Apprenticeship approach might devote class time to analyzing a particularly dense history text. Projecting an excerpt on an overhead screen, the

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teacher would read it aloud, describing how he or she approaches the text. One part of the passage might prompt the teacher to make a connection to a concept covered earlier in the course; another passage might lead the teacher to make a prediction.

"As experts in their fields, the teachers know how to read texts in those fields," says Braunger. "So, Reading Apprenticeship teachers make their own thinking and reading processes visible and accessible in order to help their students learn to read as experts too. In other words, the teachers model in strategic ways their expertise as readers and thinkers in their particular disciplines."

Reading Apprenticeship classrooms also encourage students to use each other as resources. The teachers give students a chance to work in small groups, sharing the various ways they themselves grapple with course-related text. As a result, students get access to an even broader range of ways of reading and thinking. The experience tends to create a strong social network within the classroom, which, in turn, promotes risk taking, builds students' confidence, and helps prepare them for postsecondary work. For many community college teachers, this shift has been a significant one.

Improving Achievement for English Learners and Others


An ongoing three-year WestEd research project funded by The Lumina Foundation is evaluating the effectiveness of the Reading Apprenticeship model in community colleges. The project also supports classroom-based research by community college teachers who are incorporating Reading Apprenticeship in diverse content areas. An interim finding from the evaluation is that teachers report better student achievement and stronger retention in Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, especially among English learners and other at-risk students enrolled in developmental (also known as "basic skills") classes.

An English as a Second Language teacher, for example, reports that after she taught students how to frame questions to guide their reading of a text, the students were able to handle more challenging material. And several composition teachers in the research group found that engaging students in talking about and reflecting on their reading of challenging academic texts significantly improved their writing. The major challenge reported is that planning and using Reading Apprenticeship activities takes additional time.

A Supportive Environment for Teachers and Students

Braunger is not surprised that Reading Apprenticeship is showing results. She points out that research supports the notion that students — whatever their age — learn best in a socially supportive classroom working with authentic text. Furthermore, given the ever-increasing number of students entering community colleges who are English language learners or have weak reading skills, the need for a literacy model that provides scaffolded instruction has never been greater.

And when it comes to improving postsecondary readiness, "Reading Apprenticeship gives these students the sense that they're part of a community of learners working in collaborative ways to accomplish more than they might do individually," she says. "It makes the college experience less intimidating."



As for the teachers, "They're grateful to learn ways to better support students' ability to read and think in particular disciplines," says Braunger. They also enjoy the increased interaction with students and appreciate the insight they gain into what students find easy to grasp and what is difficult to understand. "It allows the teachers to respond with the professionalism that drew them into teaching in the first place."

The result, says Braunger, is a climate of "shared responsibility" that fosters more sophisticated teaching and learning. "Once the students are reading and understanding most of the text on their own, their teacher can use class time to focus specifically on what's not making sense, or to delve deeper into the material. As for the students, they become more independent learners."

Noting that it took very little modification of the Reading Apprenticeship approach to make it relevant for community college instruction, Braunger urges teachers working with students at all levels and in all subject areas to incorporate the program's techniques into their instruction. Good teachers often do so intuitively, she says. "It means modeling what they do as expert readers in their disciplines and then giving students the time and space to practice doing the same thing with each other. It's definitely doable, effective, and well worth the trade-off in terms of how teachers spend their time."

Building Professional Development Communities, Transforming Institutions

As of the end of 2009, more than 200 community college teachers had taken part in Reading Apprenticeship professional development sessions offered by WestEd. Most recently, with a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, SLI prepared a cadre of regional Reading Apprenticeship leaders, all community college teachers themselves, to disseminate information on Reading Apprenticeship through introductory workshops at community college campuses across California.

Sam Cargile, Lumina's vice president for grant-making, says Reading Apprenticeship meshes well with foundations' interests in boosting the academic gains of community college students, including low-income and minority students who traditionally have faced barriers to such success. He especially appreciates that Reading Apprenticeship engages community college faculty in a proven intervention across the curriculum. "That immediately resonated on our end," he says. "We wanted to promote an initiative that had the potential to transform institutions in a way that made student success the highest priority."