

Views and Processes For Integrating Reading and Writing For Successful Developmental Practice

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Abstract

Integrating reading and writing into one course is a way to help students by providing a new approach quite different from the artificial boundaries of current separated courses. The process of creating such a course requires knowledge of the institution and of the needs of the student population. The curriculum design process must be reviewed and the movement of students through the courses and means of assessment and evaluation have to be determined. The literature provides clear curricular design parameters. Following proper curriculum guidelines and creating objectives and learning strategies in a logical order preserve the course content and credibility. A model reading and writing course with institutional fit is explained.

“It wasn’t accepted. I can’t believe that they just said no, and this was supposed to be such a positive move for the future. *I just can’t believe that they didn’t like this course. All that effort!*” Christine laments her situation to one of her colleagues and continues, “*I’ll never try to do something like this again!*”

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Has this happened to you? This is a very discouraging situation, especially if your effort is an attempt to integrate the current research and to meet the needs of your students. Developmental educators sometimes feel that they are on the periphery of the legitimate course world, so they can take discouragement of this type very personally.

Developmental educators are constantly looking for formats and procedures that can help them prepare students to be successful in college. Integrating reading and writing into one course is a way to help students by providing a new approach that eliminates the artificial boundaries of current separated courses. But, as for all curriculum change, the educator must have clear views and processes to follow in order to make any change a positive and improved path to the successful education of developmental students. A review of what is important to us as educators in our philosophical goals, perceived student needs, and pressing institutional issues is a way to insure that any courses we create mesh in a positive way with what already exists at our institution. Reviewing the curriculum development process is also important for new and vital implementation of a developmental course such as an integrated reading and writing content course.

Trends in Reading and Writing

Educational history continues to evolve and discussion on reading and writing is not new, having taken place since as early as 1864. But this discussion did not always view reading and writing as modes of learning or as learning necessary for success in future educational endeavors (Quinn, 1995). There are many movements that can be studied, such as the Cooperative Movement of the 1920s. This movement supported interdisciplinary connection or cooperation of teachers to promote successful student learning (Quinn, 1995).

Until the 1950s there was emphasis on an integrated reading and writing approach in education. Then elementary reading teachers, who believed that they had other concerns not addressed by the National Council of Teachers of English, a key professional organization, initiated a separation. This separation eventually became a division between those teaching reading and those in writing. From this division came the formation of the International Reading Association to meet reading concerns. Based on this early split, both reading and writing began and have continued to grow farther and farther apart (Quinn, 1995). As Dias (1990) observed, reading on the college level became the work of reading specialists, removed from the English and writing classroom. There was a division of writing from reading. English teachers began to specialize in one area or the other. Writing became synonymous with English and reading became an even more separate and distinct field of study (Quinn, 1995).

Until the 1970s no mention was made of how important it was for readers to connect with their reading in order to promote meaning. This changed with the work of researchers like LaBerge and Samuels, and was expanded by writers such as Rand Spiro, taking a cognitive perspective on reading and writing. Both the reading and writing arenas experienced similar emerging research leaning toward interactive and constructivist viewpoints (Quinn, 1995). This research has led to the new interest in combining reading and writing that we see today. There are some texts that advocate this integrative approach and there are now many developmental educators looking to forge new curricula using both areas as a realistic basis for student learning.

There are years of negatively patterned activities that have affected students due to the artificial separation of reading and writing (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991). The elementary and high schools have begun their move back to connecting reading and writing. The Whole Language movement was one favorable effort to blend English language study, maintaining that “reading and writing are natural processes that occur as a result of maturation and interaction with the language world” (McCarthy & Raphael, 1992, p.12). Though this trend has met with some resistance from older teachers and some parents, there were many teachers who advocated this connectiveness as a positive way to teach language. Today, college faculty are still dealing with students who have these attitudes from separated reading and writing study that altered students’ abilities to use both as successful modes of learning. Like elementary teachers, many developmental educators look for more ways to connect reading and writing to better educate our students.

At the college developmental level, there has been interest in these changes in public education, and many of those teachers who have taught both areas have experimented with the connection of reading and writing. Tierney (1992) states that much of the move to integrate the areas has been instigated by teachers, and that this trend toward blending reading and writing is currently reflected in discussion among developmental educators and in curricular changes.

Philosophical Issues

Curriculum comes out of a clear personal and institutional philosophy that guides important decisions that have to be made throughout the process of course production. Knowing your students, your thoughts about those students as individuals, and seeing the ideal future outcomes that students should gain from participation in their experience within your course and curriculum are important to an ability to develop courses that truly educate.

A Holistic Viewpoint

For those developmental educators contemplating the integration of reading and writing, it is a return to the ideas of a holistic model. The individual has to be taught how to use language, both by reading and writing as modes or means to learn content areas in various fields. Because many English teachers are familiar with holistic ideas on grading, it is an easy transition to look at the entire picture of how a student learns skills used for communication and interpretation of the written word. Any problems seem to stem from the existence of two separate areas of rules that now guide both the reading and writing processes. Both demand practice of skills so that students have some reasonable way of applying those skills. Holistic also implies that the overall view of how a student is applying skills makes a difference.

Basic and Higher Level Skills

The true integration of reading and writing would demand that one have equal understanding of the various levels of skills within those two areas as they are taught now. The danger would be in the individual teacher’s preparation in either reading or writing, because many times the degrees that people undertake will follow separate directions. For any true integration of this information, there would have to be application of those principles and rules that govern the language when it is both read and written. This might be easier said than done.

The problem is the need to know when to switch from basic rote skills to those higher level thinking and creative skills that become necessary for college study. For example, grammar instruction is not effective until the student recognizes why it is important to the entire writing process. The ability to pick an organizational pattern for an essay may be just as helpful as concentrating on the meaning of various sentences.

A Shift in Responsibility

There are many differences from high school to college and one of them is the refocusing of responsibility back onto students for their learning. Students can benefit from this idea if they realize the importance of reading and writing for learning.

For developmental educators, it is important to recognize that this shift in responsibility should reflect a change in the way that information is presented to students. Learning in the same way they did in high school will not promote an opportunity for growth for students at the beginning college level. There is a need to do something different, to attempt to recognize and promote the students' maturity and to educate students regarding the link between these basic skills and the standard curriculum. Obviously there is a need to break the cycle of misunderstanding and the lack of motivation that some students have experienced. They must see the value of their education in order to change an unsuccessful pattern. If we stress that all learning is good, then there should not be an artificial preference for one skill over the other. Both should be considered equal in importance to the student. Our expectation is that we want integration of skills in content courses, yet we teach these skills separately.

Interdisciplinary Trends

The interdisciplinary trends in higher education that we now see are similar in that perhaps our educational system has been following guidelines that are too artificial. The separation of reading and writing may illustrate one of the most artificial of such situations. We have often heard it said that reading is thinking and also that writing reflects the thinking of the individual. They are not separate entities.

The Equality of Reading and Writing

Separation of reading and writing from the standard curriculum is a difficulty for developmental students. Teaching separate developmental reading and writing courses usually leaves reading in a predicament because in many institutions the first freshman English course is basic writing and the second is literature. Some professors mix both reading and writing in the first course and there is definitely the mix of reading and writing skills in the second course. Sometimes students cannot see how their developmental reading courses are preparing them for this sequence, due to the way in which the first English course is taught. Some institutions do not know what to do with the basic reading course because of this dilemma. Combining reading and writing can help promote a realistic view of the importance of both skills.

Institutional Issues

There are many institutional issues that must be addressed as decisions are made about the possibility of integrating reading and writing.

Credit

Credit is a major issue. Most campuses offer imputed (non-transferable credit) or nondegree credit for developmental courses. This usually indicates that the skills being learned are prerequisites to the learning of the standard first year curriculum. Students usually do not appreciate taking these courses and will try to avoid such choices. If students are required to take two separate courses, one in reading and one in writing, they might feel as if they are penalized rather than helped by the opportunity to improve skills.

Taking fewer non-degree credits might be appealing to students. A combined reading and writing course could be taught for fewer credits. However, this might not be a wise idea unless there are other changes such as a lab (two hours for every one hour of credit) that can give students the practice they need to gain some experience with new skills. At some institutions, a four or five credit course might replace two three-credit courses, for example.

Financial Aid

Financial aid is also an issue for institutions to consider. Though aid guidelines have been responsive by allowing some developmental classes as legitimate coursework necessary to the student's success, there is now a tightening of financial aid rules and limitations on the number of possible academic terms enrolled in developmental work. Thus, the issues of credit and financial aid become intertwined, and may lead students to become increasingly resistant to placement in developmental courses.

Trained Personnel

Recruiting properly trained personnel who can do an equally good job helping students with reading and writing is not easy. First, developmental educators are still perceived as second class citizens in many institutions. Positions in developmental education are often low paying, with no job security and thus no stature, resulting in quick turnover. Second, personnel may still be educated for either reading or writing without equal training in both so that the key integration of reading and writing can take place. These are major employment issues that have been discussed within the profession for some time.

Realistic Connections

Trying to relate this work in reading and writing holistically to real situations is sometimes difficult for the practitioner. There have been many educational moves to relate what students need to actual applications. This type of movement probably needs to be brought to the college level for developmental courses and would be very helpful on the standard curriculum level.

Adult Learners

Adult students especially (and some traditional age students) worry about the amount of time it will take to finish their degrees. Adult learners are students over the age of 25 who have broken the pattern of continuous formal education and have reentered the system with a variety of life experiences unlike those of traditional students. They come back with personal time limitations and specific educational needs and their concern for a short and attainable educational program can be related to concerns caused by family considerations as well as

disability, veterans', or other benefit restrictions or loss of regular income. Adult learners would also be able to benefit from the integration of separate reading and writing courses into one course for two reasons. By combining two separate courses into one course for fewer non-degree credits, students might not believe they are losing valuable time. A more important reason is that adult learners have the ability to benefit more from integrated learning (Dinmore, 1997) and can benefit from learning tied to real life situations, desiring an "immediacy of application" (Cross, 1981, p.189).

Institutional Tradition

The processes of the institution are often issues themselves. Tradition and past practice affect how new courses are viewed and how they fit the existing framework of the institutional organization. Fitting the course into the institutional pattern of courses as well as accommodating faculty and staff schedules is important. Usually there are problems with old "past practice" workload hours for those faculty who are teaching the traditional three-hour courses.

Placement

It is a fair assumption that to have appropriate placement into any developmental course demands some sort of basic skills assessment procedure. The institution makes decisions based on a variety of factors including placement testing, transcripts, interviews, or other demonstration of the skills. Though the choice of factors used is based on institutional history and preference, the only issue seems to be trying to use multiple indicators or factors. Using more factors gives a picture of the different aspects of the student's abilities and can aid in the process. To accommodate a move toward a reading and writing course, consideration has to focus on factors highlighting each skills area or on an overall view of both areas.

Curriculum Development

Identifying Needs

The notion that an integrated reading and writing course will be offered can be a positive move for the institution. However, there is a process by which the course should be put in place. There is no question that a needs assessment is required. The ideal system would be to have the standard curriculum faculty identify those skills that they feel are necessary for student success. This procedure not only helps the developmental education faculty, but it also helps the standard curriculum faculty members rethink and verbalize exactly what skills they want their students to possess. This needs assessment can help strengthen the teaching process as well as the coordination of courses. It is also necessary for valid assessment of learning outcomes and teaching effectiveness in the regular courses.

Outcomes and Goals

Besides identification of skills, a review of real goals and their prioritization should be discussed by all faculty involved. Often this means going beyond the identified skills to the broader perspective of course outcomes and mission. Goals will be based on the institutional

philosophy and mission. Input at this level comes from faculty and staff as well as knowledge of student needs. Students can assist in telling us what they need, but this demands taking risks. Asking previous students what did and did not work is a refreshing way to view what we think we are doing as professionals.

Evaluating the course as a whole rather than merely as the sum of its component parts is important. One can start with the desired end result and then brainstorm all the steps to that end. This is actually a productive method. We have all experienced courses that did not seem to have a main focus or direction. Our developmental students need to see the whole picture. The developmental educator can help especially if the course is organized in a manner that also leads the students through a logical progression of their connection to the “real world.” The skills taught within an integrated reading and writing course are extensive and critical to academic success. If these skills are not connected for students, they continue to be problem areas; students might not learn to use strategies to the proper degree.

Objectives Lead to Strategies

Which comes first, the writing of clear course objectives or the developmental educator’s “bag of tricks?” This is a serious question and could be the cause of differing quality in courses. As Diamond (1989) suggests, “Limiting the original design to meet anticipated constraints tends to limit the creativity and openness of the process and thus results in an inferior product” (p.8). Not all developmental educators have a good grasp of curriculum development. There might be a tendency to write lessons and courses around the knowledge base and current strategies that an individual or particular group of teachers possess. Educators often tend toward the classroom situation with which they would be most familiar, rather than one that responds to broader student needs.

Determining student needs and desired outcomes through appropriate needs assessment should come before the writing of curricula. Writing goals based on student needs and curriculum outcomes can produce a clarity that maintains curriculum integrity. These goals can then be the source of our clearly written objectives, which can contain the behavior, conditions, and even the standard of performance that we can expect from our students (McBeath, 1992).

After course objectives are clearly stated, classes can be developed with all those “appropriate” strategies that we have stored away during our careers. So many times, it is possible to lose sight of the bigger picture, knowing that we ourselves might have to develop our strategies or even change our long developed image of what students need as the educational needs of our students change.

A Model for a Reading and Writing Course

At our campus we have gone through a curricular process as we have worked on developing a reading and writing course. We did have to review many of the institutional issues as well as credit course requirements and student needs. We closely followed some of the processes described by McBeath (1992), who guides the reader through greatly simplified instructional and evaluation material. We began by looking at and thinking through the entire process of a student’s move into and out of the developmental course as well as the fit of the course to previous developmental courses and to the standard content courses.

Often we restrict our creativity if we review limited parameters concerning our courses. This does not prepare the developmental educator to answer the bigger questions concerning their courses. There are many times when we have heard faculty say that they wish they could confine themselves to worrying only about their courses and not about all the outside campus issues. But this is not the way to insure that your course is comparable, validated, or even appropriate in the scheme of the campus curriculum. "While we will be focusing on courses and curriculum, we should also keep in mind that what goes on in the classroom cannot be separated from the total instructional experience of students" (Diamond, 1989, p.3). We do have to try to go beyond our own courses to respond to all possible questions concerning our students and our course.

Visualizing

Creating a visual of the course and the student movement into and out of the course can give the developmental practitioner a better handle on the fit of the course. A sample visual of our course, the assessment techniques for placement and student flow in and out of the developmental course, as well as exit criteria, are included in Figure 1.

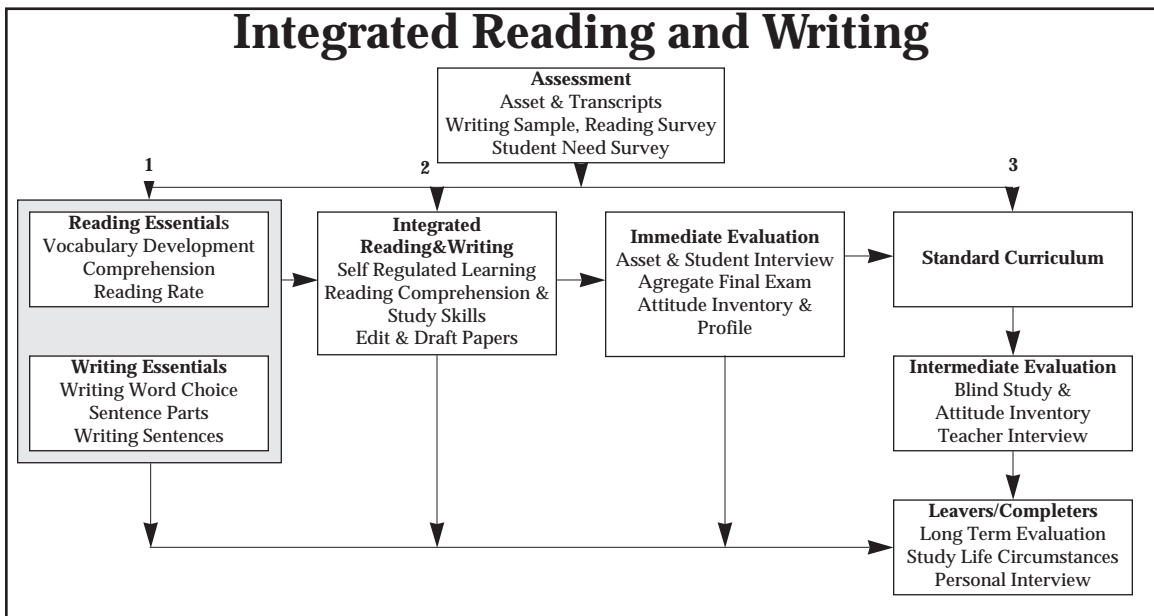


Figure 1 Course map.

From the top, our first step is the assessment process. This particular course placement depends on the current ASSET test of the American College Testing Program (ACT), transcript evaluation (Ratcliff, 1996) by our English Department, a writing sample, information reading survey, and a survey of student needs administered by our Registrar's Office. The Student Needs Survey provides data on the student's expectations concerning study, ability, and outcomes. The use of several indicators like these gives a broader and more extensive picture of the student than could be obtained through one technique or instrument.

Based on the results of the assessment step, students may place in any of three situations as indicated in columns 1, 2, or 3 of Figure 1. If students need intensive help in both reading and writing, they are placed in the traditional separated courses so that they can learn basics in both. Whether it is realistic to maintain separate reading and writing courses along with the integrated course is still under discussion. When students have successfully learned the necessary concepts, they can move into the integrated reading and writing course. Or, if students are in need of general improvement in both areas, they are placed in the integrated reading and writing course. This course assists in self-regulation of learning for the students through use of specific strategies. It also uses study skills, reading comprehension, and the writing of papers as necessary preparation for a successful move to the first year curriculum. If student skills are acceptable, they are placed in the standard first year curriculum. Some students drop out, as shown in lines to the bottom lines of Figure 1.

Evaluation methods, as depicted in Figure 1, include a student interview, a readministration of the ASSET, and an aggregate of student final exams, attitude inventories, and a portfolio of the student's work. These evaluation methods not only assess the individual student, but in their aggregate form give the instructors important information on how the integrated reading and writing course is achieving its goals. Also, as can be noted in the box labeled Intermediate Evaluation, this includes a blind study on all students finishing the first year standard curriculum (correlating grades for students unidentified as to having taken or not taken the integrated reading and writing course), attitude inventories, midterm grade check, and teacher interviews with the first year standard curriculum teachers. Use of all these techniques can help add credibility to the course and build support for a course as well as allowing for modifications in the course when necessary.

The final box represents the opportunity to study both those students who have successfully followed the developmental curriculum and graduated and those students who were unable to progress. Both groups can give back important information through interviews and surveys about their life circumstances. This type of evaluation can give legitimate and long term validity to the work being done in a course such as Integrated Reading and Writing.

As is shown, just working on course content and creating a course does not result in successful developmental practice. Unless the entire process of how the course works for students and ways to both assess student placement and evaluate the course success are well thought out, even the most creative course might not be accepted.

Implications for Developmental Education

As developmental education teachers, we should constantly be rethinking what we do and why. There are ways that we can help our students be successful. Perhaps, if we find ourselves doing the same things without any really significant results, we should seek change. Our thinking must be more tailored to what will work for our students. We cannot do what we have always done and we cannot move in a new direction unless we do it in a researched and logical manner.

Quality training for developmental education professionals is always important and instruction in curriculum design is one area that will always be critical to successful practice.

There are resources such as Diamond's (1989) book on curriculum design and McBeath's (1992) book that offer excellent guidelines for a projects such as integrating reading and writing.

Removing institutional barriers requires creative solutions. Developmental educators have to be calm and consistent as they forge ahead with new changes to the curriculum. They must be knowledgeable about all the philosophical and institutional issues and go about addressing the challenges posed. Work with non-developmental staff is critical to having the efforts of the developmental educator pay off. It is important to forge bonds and network with the faculty who teach the core curriculum.

As indicated, with creative thought and a knowledge of curriculum, institutional, and philosophical issues, courses can be created for integrating reading and writing to facilitate student success. During the next two years, our campus will be experimenting with our integrated course and as this occurs across many institutions, it will hopefully set the stage for successful developmental practice for student achievement.

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