



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services

Scholarship continues to indicate that many community college students enter higher education unprepared for the rigor of their academic courses. As a faculty member of nearly 15 years who has taught at urban and suburban, predominately white, predominately black, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions, I can verify that this is an issue that exists at many community colleges. At Bronx Community College (BCC), where I have taught for nearly 10 years, more than 80 percent of the students enrolled are required to complete at least one remedial course. Of that 80 percent, approximately 20-25 percent of students test into triple medial status, meaning they are required to complete at least one remedial reading, composition, and mathematics course. Many students place into remediation courses due to a lack of adequate educational preparation during their K-12 years.

Often faculty (myself included) have, or have had, the impression that students are taught basic academic strategies and skills before they graduate from high school. To the contrary, many community college students enter college without knowing how to effectively prepare for tests, pay special attention to **bold** and *italicized* words in materials, note important dates and specific names in textbooks, or avoid cutting and pasting content from the internet and turning it in as original work. In conversations with colleagues about students lacking basic academic skills, it became apparent that my peers were facing similar issues with the students that they serve. In noting the ubiquity of a lack of basic academic skills, I began to ask my colleagues, "How can we help this population of students?" I would follow up with the question, "What are you doing about this issue?" Frequently, I received the same response: "I send/refer students to support services."

For many community college students, academic support services are essential to their persistence and graduation. However, many community college students are balancing families, work, and socioeconomic or sociological challenges and, consequently, have difficulty with time management and fitting support services visits into their busy schedules. Moreover, support services at community colleges are usually only open and staffed from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. As a faculty member who has mostly taught night and weekend courses, these factors collectively prompt some obvious questions: What about the students who enroll in night and weekend courses? What are these students to do

about obtaining support services? I knew there had to be a way that I could supplement the student support service offices and provide direct academic support in my classes. As a result, I created an in-class, skill-building activity that I call "Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services."

Context for the Exercise

I created Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services as a result of permitting a past class to use open notes on a test. Upon grading this test, I could not understand how a majority of the class had failed. I asked the class to share the notes they had used for the test with me and quickly realized several problems. I found that many students had missed important points from the assigned textbook chapters and that they did not know how to construct or organize their notes efficiently. Many students were simply highlighting words in the textbook and doing nothing to understand or integrate the information afterward, a practice I refer to as simply "coloring words."

The Exercise

Step One: Instilling the Importance of Textbooks

I normally teach classes that meet once a week. During the fourth week of class (or the fourth meeting), I require that all students bring their textbook. It is almost impossible for students to provide an excuse why they do not have access to a textbook required for a course—advancements in education and technology allow students to rent books, access open educational resources (OERs), and purchase previous editions of textbooks online. Though the textbook is necessary for the exercise, bringing one on this day is also meant to instill the importance of textbooks to college courses. Additionally, I use the class period as an opportunity to remind students that it is possible to find affordable textbooks and encourage them to ask their instructors if they can purchase a previous edition of a textbook to save money. Having a previous edition of a text instead of no edition of a text can make a major difference in a student's overall success in a course.

Step Two: Splitting Students Into Two Groups

I start the exercise by having students count off in twos out loud. Normally while students are counting out their numbers, I see a look of confusion on their faces. This is exactly what I expect and want. When I had to participate in a count off for the purpose of grouping in school, it was usually to play a game during gym class. Being asked to count off outside the context of gym class makes students

unsure of what will happen next but, like me, they begin to anticipate playing a game and get excited. I also divide the class this way so students have to engage with peers they may not normally socialize with in the class. This encourages them to build rapport with students that they may not have had, or would not have, any interaction with throughout the semester. Upon completing the count off, I have 1's to sit together on one side of the classroom and the 2's sit together on the opposite side.

Step Three: Individual Reading

Each group is instructed to read either the first three or the last three of the next six pages of assigned reading in our textbook. Then I have students read the pages assigned to the group independently. There is always a student who "forgets" to bring a textbook; however, students who do not have their textbooks get creative. Usually they will ask a peer for permission to take a picture of the assigned pages with their cell phone (a great way for students to use cell phones in class). Students are given seven to ten minutes to read the assigned pages in the textbook. While students are reading, I also read or review the same material.

Step Four: Individual Notes

After students read the assigned textbook pages, they are tasked with creating notes on what they found important in the reading. Students are given five minutes to complete their individual notes. As students log their individual notes, I also create and type relevant notes to be shared with students later in the exercise.

Step Five: Group Discussion

Next, each group is instructed to share their notes and discuss what they found important. I allot five to seven minutes for students to have a collective discussion about the material they read.

Step Six: Group Outline

Around the seven-minute mark of discussion, each group is provided with a poster-size sheet of paper and a marker. The group is required to create a shared outline of important points from their reading to present to the opposite group. Students are given seven to ten minutes to create the outline. I provide no guidance on format or content for the groups' outlines. While students are creating the outline, I create and type three questions derived from each group's reading.

Step Seven: Group Presentations

Once students have completed an outline for the readings, the first group comes to the front of the class and presents the outline of their half of the reading to classmates in the opposite group. At the conclusion of the first group's presentation, using a projector, I display the three questions that I created from that section of the reading. The group that is not presenting must write down responses to my questions using only the outline and

information from the presenting group as reference. Once this cycle is complete, the second group presents their outline. Again, I present my three questions to the first group and they write down answers using only the second group's presented outline to inform their responses.

Step Eight: Review Answers to the Questions

Once both groups have presented, I provide them with the answers to my questions. Then I display the outline I created on the same material that they read. Finally, I have the students reopen their textbooks, annotate or take notes on the things I put in my outline, and then explain why this information was important to place in my outline.

Conclusion

I have found that the Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services exercise has increased student success in my class and is a foundational skill set that students transfer into other classes. After performing the exercise, student test scores in my classes, on average, increase by 15 percent. Students also consistently comment on the helpfulness of the exercise in their course evaluations. Moreover, according to The National Center for Educational Statistics, Bronx Community College reported an overall graduation rate of 16 percent for students who started in the Fall 2014. The average graduation rate of students who take my courses, however, is 45 percent.

Though many students have commented that they know where the support services are located on campus, they admit that they are embarrassed to go to support services or do not know what help to ask for once there. By incorporating the Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services exercise into a classroom setting, students are able to work in a familiar group, feel more at ease while developing what can be a confusing new skill set, and use already-required course material for skill building. I also believe that my own participation in the Academic Skills 101: In-Class Support Services exercise allows me to connect with students by showing them I have taken notice of an academic skill set they lack and have taken the time to find a way to help.

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