



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

TEACHING FOR LITERACY AND STUDENT SUCCESS: AN INTEGRAL APPROACH TO REMEDIAL READING

I accepted an adjunct position to teach remedial reading at the community college because there was such a strong need for these classes and few qualified teachers willing to take them on. I had just begun teaching middle school with an emergency state teaching certificate, and I thought that taking on these two assignments would be an interesting experience. The need was apparent, and teaching seemed to be calling me; and so I began a transition career. I had some practical experience as a substitute teacher for a few years and as a private coach for two decades; but without the professional training and teaching degree, I knew to approach this challenge with an open mind and a willingness to learn.

After the first few weeks in the classroom, I began to understand some of the real and diverse needs of my students. As an older, white male teacher, I immediately sensed the distance between my students and me. They came in distinctive groups: mostly in their late teens and early twenties; local Hispanics and Central and South American student athletes still learning English; other low-income, first-generation students who did not have adequate language skills; and a group of out-of-state students.

My relative lack of preparation in teaching the reading process proved in some ways to be an advantage. Intuitively, I felt that my first effort was to bridge these barriers, try get to know my students as individuals, and help them in subtle ways to develop their confidence and self-awareness. Initial class time was devoted to journaling and sharing personal stories. I often told them about myself, hoping to build trust, establish relationships, and encourage them to reveal their own stories. I repeated to them often, referring to our work together, "It's not so much about the grade, but about the learning."

As the first semester moved into the second and third, I constantly looked for ways to integrate motivation, course content, general student competencies, and evaluation by setting attainable goals, making class time interesting and relevant, and working to give timely feedback. This was a difficult challenge. By asking other teachers for ideas, remembering some from my own best classes, and simply devising my own strategies that could work within my limited time budget, I gradually developed a way to do all that.

A system, using dual notebooks, evolved. Each student must maintain two notebooks—one in which to work and one that I can hold for the week and evaluate. This gives me time to go over students' work while they continue working daily. Each week we exchange one notebook for the other. Each notebook is divided into three sections: 1) Vocabulary Study, 2) Class Notes, and 3) Journal.

The objective for the Vocabulary Study is to build a useful, personal vocabulary. Students are instructed to select words in context, from *any* reading source they encounter over the week, and to follow a prescribed outline: a) record the word in context, b) guess at its meaning and part of speech, c) check with a dictionary, d) find a synonym or antonym, and e) use the word in an original sentence. They are required to complete a minimum of five words each week.

In the section for Class Notes, they are to keep detailed notes and records as they follow lectures, complete reading exercises, participate in and respond to group presentations, and participate in class discussions guided by our textbook. My practice has been to provide active graphic models on the board and encourage students to copy them, gradually developing their own style. This also allows me to see immediately who has missed any important lessons as we progress. General reading skills and strategies are included to increase comprehension and speed, and to develop critical reading, thinking, and analysis. Intrinsically, they are learning basic study skills and strategies; connecting textbook topics to selected, outside reading; and learning how to learn.



Finally, in the Journal section, students are required to write a minimum of three pages each week. Provocative prompts are available, but students are encouraged to write about “what they know”—e.g., themselves (who they are, what they do, and how they think). We remove the anxiety of writing by *not* evaluating for mechanics and conventions, but solely on thought and content. While I occasionally point out grammar, spelling, punctuation, and fluency errors, I believe that every effort to communicate should be praised and encouraged, by pointing out the value and worth of each journal. As the class progresses and confidence builds, we learn to make more connections between different reading selections, the world around us, and our own personal experiences.

Conclusion

With each week and each class, I find ways to do it all much better. Perhaps the most important thing is to convey the reasons and purposes behind the system and explain details so that students “buy into” the process. Once they do, there is an amazing increase in motivation, attendance, and completion. I also find a pronounced improvement in writing skills, something that develops almost as a side effect. Our department has started using a standard pretest and post-test for students enrolled in these remedial reading courses. In my most recent class of 15 students who took both tests, scores indicated an average increase of 2.5 years in Grade Equivalency in just 10 weeks of study. While some students showed little measurable change, a third increased reading Grade Equivalency by more than three years. But by far the greatest results are intangible. I see students leaving my classroom with greater confidence in themselves—a clearer sense of who they are and where they are going.

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Suanne D. Roueche, *Editor*

January 27, 2006, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545. email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu