



Instructional Approaches in Developmental English

By Nicholas T. Vick

In response to a state policy initiative, select community colleges in North Carolina recently piloted a new accelerated developmental English curriculum. The eight-week, three credit hour courses consist of an integrated reading and writing curriculum and are appropriately named Developmental Reading and English (DRE). All courses include a mastery-based learning component requiring students to score 80% or higher in the course and on final assignments in order to pass. As of fall 2014, all community colleges in North Carolina were required to implement DRE courses (Liston, 2012).

Statement of the Problem and Significance

Although a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the creation, development, and implementation of North Carolina's accelerated DRE courses, there is very little research and discussion of how the instructors should actually teach these courses. There is, however, a modest but consistent body of research identifying general best practices for teaching in the developmental classroom. Being aware of these best practices is important because, as Boylan (2002) noted, "...the quality of classroom instruction is the single most important contributor to the success of developmental students" (p. 68). Boylan pointed out that although it may be difficult, if not impossible, to control and influence students in other areas of their lives, it is possible for instructors to be influential in the classroom setting.

With this study, I explored the instructional strategies used by a select group of North Carolina community college English faculty who operate in the critical space of a developmental classroom. Doing this allowed me to address the lack of attention given to instructional approaches used in accelerated and paired reading/writing English classes. To provide research related to instructional approaches used by these faculty, I conducted a phenomenological study. The findings of this study reveal pedagogical approaches that current developmental English instructors believe are most effective for successfully teaching students in both accelerated and traditional courses.

Review of Instructional Approaches

In the following literature review, two important considerations for teaching in developmental education are presented: accommodating diversity and using engaging instructional techniques.

Accommodating Diversity

Due to the diverse nature of students who attend community colleges and take developmental coursework, instructors will

invariably teach students from a variety of backgrounds with multiple skill levels (Boylan, 1995). Academically underprepared students representing a diverse mix of socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities, are often first-generation college students and members of underrepresented populations (Mulvey, 2009). In fact, developmental students are one of the most diverse groups in all of higher education (Boylan, 2002).

The question then arises as to how to teach developmental students because they are so diverse. Boylan (2002) suggested using a variety of teaching strategies: "Varied teaching methods are particularly important because developmental students are among the most diverse in higher education" (p. 72). Examples of varied instructional strategies include active learning, group activities, learning communities, structured learning, computer-assisted instruction, and culturally responsive teaching (Boylan & Saxon, 2012). In addition, instructors who use activities such as split classroom debates provide opportunities to recognize diversity both in content and from the student perspectives (Barkley, 2010). Davis (2009) noted several additional strategies for working with diverse student populations including using inclusive language, pronouncing student names correctly, and allowing students to work cooperatively.

Effective teachers in developmental education courses also prepare lessons to capitalize on students' various learning styles and capabilities (Smittle, 2003). According to Whitford (2013), it is important for faculty who teach students with diverse learning styles to understand the intellectual capabilities of their students. In order to engage a variety of learning preferences, Universal Course Design principles may be applied (Barkley, 2010). Universal Course Design calls for the use of various learning activities along with the creation of a welcoming environment that promotes engagement between students (Schreiner, Rothenberger, & Shotz, 2013). Diverse learning experiences may also include informative visuals such as charts, pictures, or demonstrations; in addition, the instructor might find ways to integrate auditory elements such as presentations or class discussions (Bain, 2004). A varied instructional style provides multiple students with opportunities to acquire information, apply knowledge gained, and develop skills appropriate for success (Smith & Valentine, 2012).

Besides modifying instructional strategies, instructors can accommodate diversity by striving to reduce prejudice, infusing multicultural ideas, and connecting to their own cultural roots (Beyer, 2010). The instructor is responsible for being aware of any preconceived stereotypes and recognizing the

importance of diversity in a college class (Davis, 2009). Davis also recommended that instructors select material free from stereotypes and representative of diverse populations. Faculty can share best learning practices for working with diverse student populations in professional learning communities or through other means of professional development such as presenting at a conference or pursuing publication (Boylan, 2002; Grubb et al., 1999; King & Watson, 2010).

Engaging Students

In the past, developmental educators relied on traditional lecture or skill and drill approaches to teach their students (Breneman & Haarlow, 1998; Grubb et al., 1999). Fortunately, there are several options for engaging students through different instructional approaches. These instructional activities should be “carefully planned, diligently managed, and thoughtfully delivered” (Boylan, 2002, p. 68). Effective teaching involves continuous communication between the instructor and students, routine monitoring of students’ progress, and an infusion of instructional strategies to engage students (Yoo, 2013).

One common way to engage students is through collaborative learning activities. Davis (2009) identified three different types of collaborative learning groups. The first is an informal group with ad hoc pairings designed to complete short in-class activities such as mind maps, WebQuests, debates, or Know-Want to know-Learned (KWL) charts. The second type of group is a formal learning group designed so that members participate in authentic learning exercises, inquiry-based instruction, and problem-based learning in a more structured format. The third type of group is a study group where students meet together throughout the semester to review class material. These kinds of structured groups, where the instructor facilitates student interactions, are useful for establishing a community of engaged learners both inside and outside of the classroom (Barkley, 2010).

To ensure that the collaborative learning process is successful for students, Henderson and Smith (2007) outlined four steps. First, instructors should align student learning outcomes with team activities. Second, faculty should create realistic learning objectives for their students. Third, instructors should make clear why the students will be working in groups for a particular assignment and may even elaborate on the benefits of group work. Finally, students should have adequate time to complete group activities, and the instructor should provide continuous feedback.

Another method for engaging students is contextualized teaching and learning (CTL). CTL is a framework that enables students to search for meaning within lessons (Johnson, 2002). In developmental education, CTL can be a tool for exploring careers, identifying meaning in content by relating material to students’ lives, and producing desired learning outcomes (Perin, Jacobs, & Baker, 2008). CTL lessons make significant connections by promoting critical and creative thinking (Johnson, 2002). CTL can also result in improved literacy skills. For example, in a developmental reading class, greater gains were found in written summarization skills for developmental students who read contextualized texts versus generic texts (Perin et al., 2011). One of the most well-known CTS models is the I-BEST contextualized learning model for developmental education created by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (2014). The program integrates developmental education content with professional-technical curricula. CTL concepts can also be embedded into daily lessons (Johnson, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore faculty perceptions of teaching in developmental English classes, specifically DRE classes. Participants reported experiences in their classrooms, offered reflections on teaching DRE courses, and provided insight into their instructional approaches in the classroom. The following central research question (Creswell, 2013) guided the research process for this study. What instructional approaches do developmental faculty in DRE English classes perceive to be most effective in supporting student learning?

Methods

Research Design

The phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study to examine the lived experiences of developmental English faculty. More specifically, transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) allows a framework for participants to share their instructional approaches and thoughts of being developmental English instructors. For transcendental phenomenology, themes are identified by grouping significant statements and quotes. Further, the interpretative framework of social constructivism (Creswell, 2013) is useful for intertwining multiple perspectives of instructors to synthesize this study’s findings.

To ensure that my perspectives and experiences of teaching developmental English did not interfere with this study’s research design and subsequent data collection, I employed the Epoche concept (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas wrote, “In the Epoche, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). This approach was beneficial because I did not allow my own ideas to interfere or shape the findings. The premise of my research design was to identify overarching and interconnected themes related to instructional approaches of developmental English faculty.

To analyze data, I used Moustakas’s (1994) modified van Kaam method that involves seven sequential steps. For each transcribed interview, I listed every expression or response relative to teaching developmental English. Then, I eliminated any responses not directly related to teaching. For the third step, I searched for thematic connections. Next, I checked for explicit and compatible responses to the themes. For the fifth step, I constructed an individual textual description that included direct quotations from the interviews. Then, I constructed an individual structural description for each participant. For the last step, I combined the textual and structural descriptions related to specific themes that emerged in the interview process.

Participants

The participants in this study were five developmental English instructors from a community college in northeastern North Carolina selected using convenience sampling. The instructors were full time faculty members and taught at least one course of developmental English each semester. The participants were aged 35, 42, 43, 58, and 59. Four participants were female, and one was male. Additionally, four participants were Caucasian, and one was African American. Regarding experience teaching developmental education classes, two of the participants taught 8 years, one taught 10 years, one taught 11 years, and one taught 28 years. Three of the participants earned Master’s degrees, and two participants earned Bachelor’s degrees. To protect identities of the participants, the instructors are referred to using pseudonyms.

Instrumentation and Procedures

Before beginning the field research of this study, I sought

and received IRB approval from all appropriate institutions with some form of involvement in the study. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, I acted as the primary instrument to gather and collect data. To recruit participants, I sent an email to determine which faculty members might be available, interested, and willing to participate. When a faculty member agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled a one-on-one, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The primary questions for the interview are listed below.

- How do you prepare for class?
- How would you describe your class?
- What do you do in class with your students?

Other questions emerged through conversation during interviews based on the responses of participants. Audio recordings were stored on an encrypted data file on my personal computer. After each interview was completed, I transcribed and typed responses in Microsoft Word. To triangulate data and address issues of transferability, participants were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire and written response. The written response asked participants to describe in one or two paragraphs how they overcome challenges in teaching developmental English.

Results

The results of this study indicate three unifying themes throughout the participants' responses. One overwhelming theme is the importance of creating active learning environments in which the instructor assumes a facilitator role, and classes are infused with various collaborative learning activities. In planning for more active learning in her classes, Caitlin asked herself, "How can I create a collaborative environment so they [students] are sharing ideas?" In reflecting on collaboration, April mentioned, "In the groups, the students might answer a certain number of questions after reading and then present to the class, or do a critical thinking exercise together. They have a group from the beginning." Beth also reflected on collaborative learning: "My personal learning preference is collaboration. I tend to teach to my preference, so I've always included collaborative and group work." Beth often has her students complete a paragraph construction activity in small groups to learn more about the integrated reading and writing process.

An interactive classroom is essential for engaging developmental students and that often entails avoiding limiting traditional teaching methods such as lecture. Caitlin stated, "If the class is all based in lecture, it's not going to be very effective for any students, but especially ours, so I try to think through how I can appeal to different learning styles in the way I am going to present material." Still, there are moments where lecture is necessary and appropriate. Derrick primarily lectures, but he finds ways to integrate humor and engage students through discussion. April too mentioned using discussion: "There is a lot of discussion in my class... a lot of critical thinking exercises and discussion." Beth is a proponent of discovery learning and believes that interactive class sessions provide students opportunities to activate schema and to be involved in the learning process.

A second common theme is creating a learning atmosphere that welcomes student mistakes. Caitlin remarked, "I want them to feel like they can make mistakes in class and that it is okay. That's a chance for us to clarify where their difficulties are." Such an atmosphere encourages students to understand why they made a mistake, to independently ask the instructor for assistance, and to feel confident in correcting errors. Derrick stated, "I like when

mistakes happen because I actually depend on the mistakes. My goal in my classroom is to help students figure out why they make the mistakes." The central idea is that students will learn from making mistakes, and instructors need to be prepared for these teachable moments. A non-threatening, low-stakes atmosphere will encourage student learning in a developmental classroom.

A third common thread from these data suggests that building a sense of community is paramount to developing an atmosphere for students to be successful. The participants mentioned various ways to establish a community of learners in the classroom. For example, Caitlin stated, "The first thing I do within the first couple of days is get the contact information of three other students in the class. The primary reason I do that is to give them a strategy to get something they missed from class." Erin mentioned that she shares personal experiences with her students to connect with them. Group activities also enable students to form connections with each other in class.

A corollary to building a sense of community is that the instructors truly care and are passionate about their students' success. The instructors in this study were concerned with helping their students overcome challenges and be successful as evidenced by their collective responses to the interview questions. April stated, "I try to be very helpful. I do meet my students outside of class. I'll say, 'Hey, I'll be available at Barnes and Nobles on Saturday if you want to drop by.'" Other participants spoke about being available during office hours and even conducting tutoring sessions with their students. Erin focused on a broader conception of helping students: "I think in developmental studies we aren't just developing the skills in English. We are developing the whole student, and I think that is the most important thing." Similarly, Derrick stated, "Developmental students need life skills, and one of the key life skills is organization and planning." Beth also noted the importance of developmental English as developing invaluable communication skills that her students can use in future careers.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Only one group of instructors at a single community college were researched in this study. Other groups of developmental English instructors from multiple community colleges might share different perspectives on teaching that could be beneficial for the developmental education community. In addition, the instructors in this study work in a centralized department directed by one developmental studies department chair. Again, it may be beneficial to consider instructional approaches of developmental English instructors who work in programs that are decentralized. Adjunct instructors could offer insight into their teaching approaches as part-time faculty and how it may differ from those of full-time faculty members. Finally, to enrich the conversation of successful pedagogical approaches from a different perspective, it would be beneficial to interview students to understand what they find to be engaging and helpful instruction.

Recommendations for Practice Implications for DRE Instruction

Since DRE classes are only eight weeks in length, instructors have a very short timeframe to connect with students and teach valuable content. Thus, instructors should be organized and follow a course schedule as much as possible. The application of active learning strategies can help to build a sense of community between the students. Instructors can also use the writing

process to teach students to recognize their own errors and improve upon them. Students will learn that writing academic papers often requires multiple revisions and a positive attitude to be successful. Additionally, meaningful learning activities will have to take place outside of class due to the limited timeframe that students actually spend in class during the course.

Active Learning

Developmental English instructors should consider forming and participating in professional learning communities where active learning strategies can be shared both formally and informally. The instructors might use an online discussion board to share examples of engaging lessons if meeting in person during a semester is too arduous. Specific topics could include taking on the role of the facilitator in the classroom, using collaborative learning activities, incorporating peer review during the writing process, and implementing contextualized learning opportunities. Each topic could be reviewed during a given week, and instructors could share the opportunity to facilitate a discussion. This method would ensure that each instructor was responsible and engaged, thus promoting greater faculty buy-in for an important and inexpensive professional development opportunity. To continue the momentum, instructors could observe other classes to note examples of quality active learning strategies.

Welcoming Learning Environment

It is virtually impossible to understand the background and unique circumstances of every student that each developmental English instructor teaches. After all, some instructors teach up to six classes with over twenty students in each class on average every semester. The participants in this study, however, continually mentioned getting to know their students and feeling compassion for their students as cornerstones to effective developmental instruction. Thus, connecting with students through creative and sometimes tireless means instills a sense of importance into the educational world of developmental students.

Once students realize that instructors are invested in their learning, they may be more willing to make mistakes that will afford them learning opportunities. When students make mistakes, it is an opportunity for valuable instruction. Perhaps one creative idea to instill a mistake-welcome mindset for developmental instructors is to host a training session where instructors have to complete difficult or unordinary tasks. These different tasks would almost assuredly lead the instructors to make a variety of errors. Afterwards, all participants could discuss how they felt when they made errors and the importance of cultivating a welcoming learning environment in their own classrooms where mistakes are guaranteed to occur. This role reversal activity would help instructors understand to some degree the difficulties that some of their students face.

Sense of Community

Building a sense of community where students feel as if the instructor is genuinely concerned for their success is critical in a developmental classroom. Some simple recommendations to develop a communal feeling are for the instructor to arrive a few minutes before class to talk with students, stay after class a few minutes to answer questions, and be available during stated office hours. It might even be beneficial to require students to attend office hours on an occasional basis. Also, instructors need to be aware of various campus resources such as tutoring and disability services to connect students with these types of programs as necessary. Students very likely want chances to connect with each other as

well, so again, collaborative learning assignments are helpful.

The instructor's approach to the classroom must be one that is organized and respected by his or her students. Therefore, classroom management techniques should be emphasized in instructor training sessions. Instructors should know how to handle talkative students, cell phone disruptions, or disgruntled students who are upset about grades. Classroom management is important for developing an ongoing sense of community where learning is the priority. For instructors to develop effective classroom management techniques, they might consider attending conferences, viewing webinars, or reading scholarly articles. The overarching goal is building a sense of community to create an opportunity for student success.

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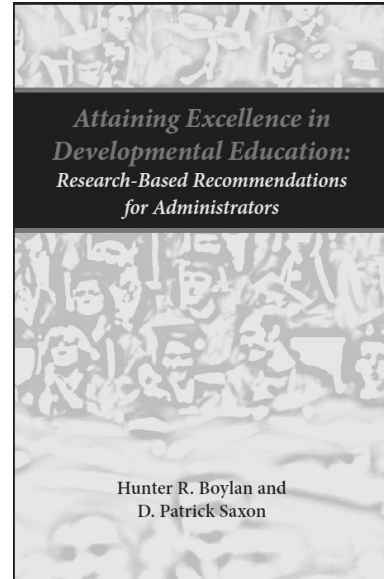
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Attaining Excellence in Developmental Education: Research-Based Recommendations for Administrators

By Hunter R. Boylan, Ph.D. and D. Patrick Saxon, Ed.D.

Applying lessons learned from years of studying research and best practices in developmental education at high performing institutions, **Attaining Excellence** is designed to provide recommendations to administrators that will contribute to excellence in the developmental education classroom. It is organized into two sections. Section One recommends actions that cost little or nothing to implement. Section Two recommends actions that involve the expenditure of resources and provides justification for doing so. Appendices are provided which include noncognitive assessment instruments, recommended readings for developmental educators, and a checklist for administrators to use in determining the extent to which they have made decisions and assigned the resources necessary for excellence in developmental education.



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