

Never Too Late: Boosting Reading Scores in Community College

Like many community college teachers, Nika Hogan chose her career because she wanted to help students from all backgrounds succeed in higher education. But despite her commitment to equity and her knowledge of best teaching practices, students in her composition classes did not actively engage with the expository texts she selected to stimulate classroom discussions and guide their writing assignments.

"I knew that when students struggled to understand the reading they were assigned, they would rely on the teacher to tell them about the text," says Hogan, who is a professor of English at Pasadena City College in California. "But I wanted them to be able to read in a way that allowed them to construct meaning from the text themselves, and I was frustrated because I didn't know how to work that magic."

That changed in 2007, when Hogan learned about a new professional development program created by WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative. Building on the popular and proven Reading Apprenticeship model for middle and high school teachers, the Community College Faculty Seminars in Reading Apprenticeship evolved to meet the demands of institutions serving adult learners. In the higher education setting, Reading Apprenticeship shows teachers how to draw on what they know and do as knowledgeable, discipline-based readers in chemistry, dental hygiene, refrigeration repair, or other academic and technical fields, and then how to share those skills with students.

Since 2006, Reading Apprenticeship has trained more than 1,000 community college teachers in 25 states, leading to "transformative" shifts in instruction, according to participants. Research has shown that Reading Apprenticeship gives teachers an increased sense of responsibility for addressing literacy in subject-area classes and a wider repertoire of resources and tools for addressing student reading difficulties, which inspires them to share the approach with colleagues across their campuses.

Collaboration, Conversation, and Comprehension

Reading Apprenticeship differs from other remediation approaches at the community college level in that it is adaptable to all divisions, including developmental education, career and technical education, and "gateway" courses that enable students to progress toward degrees. It also can be used in any content area.

"I had never experienced professional learning in this way, ever. I really didn't know it existed," Hogan says. "It's smart and research based. Reading Apprenticeship starts from the premise that

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students come to us with strengths that we can build on, and that your job as a teacher is to figure out what those are.”

Reading Apprenticeship offers a framework of instructional routines that teachers can use to create respectful, collaborative adult learning environments. The program addresses four critical interactive learning dimensions:

- **Social dimension**—Students and teachers establish classroom norms to encourage teamwork and share reading comprehension strategies through discussions, book talks, and other protocols.
- **Personal dimension**—Students learn to assess their reading performance and set goals that lead to reading fluency and range. They begin to build the habits of mind and intellectual discipline that are essential for success in higher education.
- **Cognitive dimension**—Teachers break down the steps for reading in their disciplines and work with students to monitor the students’ comprehension.
- **Knowledge-based dimension**—Students learn to identify and use text structures, language signals, and discipline-specific discourse styles that are key to unlocking subject-area content.

Teachers integrate these four dimensions into instruction through routine metacognitive conversations with students, aimed at drawing out what students do and don’t understand in texts. Once those conversations begin, the students and teachers construct living lists of reading strategies that they use to support understanding. They are able to borrow each others’ strategies to enlarge their individual reading repertoires.

Through discussions and peer-group sharing, students learn to make personal connections to texts, which aids comprehension. “Becoming a more active reader, learning to purposefully engage with text, and practicing problem solving in class are all part of the process,” says Ruth Schoenbach, Co-Director of the Strategic Literacy Initiative. “It’s okay to be confused as long as you work with each other and dig into the text. Students who have a strategy for learning feel more successful and believe that, the next time they’re facing difficult text on their own, they will have a better way of tackling it.”

Through think-alouds and other modeling strategies, teachers share how they read, how they get tripped up in reading, and how they work around obstacles. This scaffolded approach to building meaning from reading benefits both teachers and students.

“We don’t want our faculty necessarily becoming experts in teaching reading,” says Michele Lesmeister, a tenured faculty member in the basic studies department at Renton Technical College in Renton, Washington. “We want them to apprentice students in the ways of reading for their field, and modeling reading skills needed by a legal secretary is going to be very different from modeling good reading practice for a student in nursing assistance.

“We inspired our faculty by explaining to them, “You are the expert in this field, and you have the capacity to communicate to students how you read in your field of expertise,” Lesmeister adds. “These are new eyes on your textbooks and your handouts, and it is your responsibility, as the master reader in the class, to show students how to access, engage with, and comprehend the



materials.” She also notes that watching students’ learning progress provides reinforcement for faculty: “When you start to see your students ‘being smarter,’ doing things you didn’t think they could do, it’s very energizing.”

“Phenomenal” Results

Nika Hogan described a colleague who, for years, had failed about 75 percent of the students who took her microbiology course, and was overjoyed to discover new ways to reach students through Reading Apprenticeship. Hogan also spoke of a history teacher and a psychology teacher, both talented lecturers, who had been moved to adopt more collaborative and interactive practices because they realized that their students learned more that way.

“It’s hard to describe how discouraging it can be, teaching at a community college and not being successful,” says Hogan, who has taken on a leadership role with Reading Apprenticeship. “On the national level, community college faculty are seen as being intractable and unwilling to change. They’re not. You’ve got to open up a space for the learning that needs to happen, and Reading Apprenticeship offers that.”

Reading Apprenticeship has had a profound impact on community college students. A 2011 study of 25 classrooms by the Renton Technical College Research Center showed that the percentage of students completing courses at the institution had increased from an average of 60 percent before Reading Apprenticeship to 90 percent afterward. Other research has shown that Reading Apprenticeship students acquire a greater range of strategies to support comprehension, which boosts their confidence and improves their reading and writing skills in courses beyond English.

Fully 80 percent of Renton Technical College’s faculty has been trained in the Reading Apprenticeship methods, and its teachers and students report having stronger relationships and more supportive communities for learning. “It’s phenomenal how it changes the classroom dynamic between the teacher and students,” Lesmeister says. “The PowerPoints are gone, and the students are doing the reading. That’s what education should be about.”

Lessons Learned

Both Lesmeister and Hogan say that one of the important lessons of the Reading Apprenticeship experience at the community college level is that schools need to build curricular and social bridges to help adult learners adapt to the college environment and academic demands. In the same way that many high schools set up ninth grade academies or that four-year colleges offer freshman orientation courses, community colleges, Hogan says, should provide common first-year experiences that help students acclimate to higher education.

For example, building on the success of Reading Apprenticeship, Pasadena Community College initiated a required seminar for first-year students. The open-access seminar, which includes reading shared texts, analyzing peer-reviewed articles, and practicing strategic problem solving, is a three-unit course, transferable to University of California institutions. At the end of the semester, students must complete extensive research projects and present their findings at a conference.

Hogan says faculty members are always moved when they see students who may have entered college with weak reading or comprehension skills expertly sharing their investigations of topics



such as informed consent, institutional racism, and the relationship between literacy and power. “What’s changed,” she says, “is that, as a result of ‘apprenticing’ to an expert reader in a supportive, collaborative environment, they’ve improved their reading strategies, fluency, and stamina. They have the confidence to dig for ideas and meaning in texts.

“It sends the most powerful message,” she adds. “Reading Apprenticeship is really helping us show that the deficit model—the common misconception that, because adult students lack some formal academic preparation for college, they don’t have the capacity to learn college-level material—is absolutely wrong.”

For more information about the online and face-to-face faculty learning opportunities available through WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative, contact Kate Meissert by email at kmeisse@wested.org or by telephone at 510.302.4211, or go to the Reading Apprenticeship website at <http://www.readingapprenticeship.org>.