

**College Knowledge:
Creating Meaningful Preparatory Curriculum**
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Throughout my life I have always hated reading . . . Now I see my problem was understanding what I was reading, not reading itself. The reading log process forced me to comprehend what I was reading, by finding the main points and writing them down.

—A student

All forms of reading, especially in a college setting, benefit from using writing to process information in the form of notes, summaries, reflections, responses, reporting, and research writing.

Shoreline Community College (SCC) just north of Seattle, serves 8,000 students. Approximately half the students are working toward transferring to a four-year institution and the other half toward a professional-technical degree or certificate. About 25 percent of the student body is from various U.S. co-cultures and from other countries; 75 percent are white, as are half the students in Developmental English.

In the early 1990s, two English faculty decided to recreate the Developmental English program to address underprepared students' needs. As part of a Title III grant, we reviewed literature in cognitive psychology, linguistics, reading theory, adult education, and other fields relevant to helping students become strong learners. The result is a three-course learning community sequence that differs significantly from traditional developmental programs in several ways.

Probably the most apparent difference in SCC's Developmental English sequence is that reading, writing, and study skills are integrated at all levels. All forms of reading, especially in a college setting, benefit from using writing to process information in the form of notes, summaries, reflections, responses, reporting, and research writing. In fact, writing is the clearest way that students' reading process can be made apparent for evaluation, metacognitive awareness, and improvement. Conversely, reading provides models for writing as well as the source of material for writing. At the same time, reading and writing are also major tools for learning—two important elements of study skills. The fact that most developmental programs do not provide students with the opportunity to practice skills in college-like contexts could contribute to perennially low retention rates among underprepared students.

A second feature of the Developmental English sequence is that students read college-level material and practice a reading process every time they read (Dusenberry et al. 2002). Our review of the literature indicated that students needed to hone their reading, writing, and thinking abilities using materials they encounter later in their college studies. Traditionally, reading instruction for college students, especially those deemed underprepared, has had students learn discrete reading skills such as identifying main ideas and details, defining vocabulary, and so on, in short selections or excerpts that are often not related to each other.

In our sequence, we assign challenging, college-level readings for three reasons. First, students develop and practice reading of a difficulty similar to what they will encounter in their college classes. Second, students learn a reading process that includes distinguishing more important from less important information (finding main ideas) and identifying words they don't understand. Third, the content is carefully chosen to help students understand college culture

and the academic subjects. The readings are related in meaning and build on each other; they help students develop a deeper understanding of ideas and their relationships that serve their current and later learning.

Students have a difficult time comprehending reading for two general reasons: they don't have sufficient background knowledge, including vocabulary and context, and they don't have adequate or appropriate strategies to attack the reading. If students learn a functional reading process including strategies for solving reading problems, and they are given adequate background knowledge, they can understand even very difficult material. Another tangible result of choosing challenging material is the pride that students feel in their intellectual accomplishments.

Rather than providing teacher-generated pre-reading and post-reading questions, we teach students a consistent reading process called a Reading Log, which requires readers to follow an eleven-step process: pre-reading to get ready to learn, reading to understand and to learn, and post-reading to consolidate learning. Students use their Reading Logs to identify issues, questions, confusions, and problems for discussion. At first, students do not like this assignment, but come to appreciate the difference it makes in their ability to understand and remember what they read.

Just as students practice the whole reading process in all three courses of the sequence, they also compose essays in all three courses. Because segmenting part of the writing process is not effective, this practice in composing whole essays regularly is productive. Relationships among the concepts of thesis, organization, and development are extremely complex so continual writing enables students to focus on depth, heart, and style.

Finally, and perhaps the most important difference, readings of essays, articles, stories, poems, and textbook chapters in the courses occur around themes of “college culture.” As critical thinking leader Richard Paul (1993) says, students must have something to think critically *about*. Providing readings of increasing complexity all related to one common theme helps students build deep understanding and critical thinking abilities that cannot be taught or practiced without depth of knowledge. Through readings about what it means to be educated and what kinds of thinking and problem solving are valued in the academy, students can practice reading on meaningful materials while gaining knowledge that can help them write more sophisticated and meaningful essays.

The transition to college from homemaking, high school, or the working world is a tremendously difficult one. This difficulty is not due primarily, however, to an inability to think critically, write grammatically, or develop appropriate study habits. The most important factor in successfully making the transition into college is the ability to adjust to the culture shock students experience when they enter the academic world. The Developmental English sequence helps students understand, appreciate, and utilize the unique culture of that academic world. This acculturation means learning about the values, behaviors, and sanctions of the academy. Students need to be introduced to these values in an analytical and critical environment so they can evaluate their benefits and freely choose to participate in the culture of college.

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For example, in Critical Thinking in College and Life, the first course in SCC's Developmental English program, students read short fiction and essays about the transition to college and the qualities of successful learners among other things: "I never knew that you could read all about a person's life experience like this. I never knew you could write about it, either." The student who makes these comments has just read *The Magic Barrel* by Bernard Malamud, and the class discusses it in a unit on the role and effects of family culture on life choices. In light of the Malamud story and other readings, students talk together about how their families' and cultures' attitudes about education affect their choices about college, and how their own experiences compare to the author's experiences. Their written and spoken comments are insightful, and despite a few spelling and grammar errors, are cogent and understandable. In addition to learning about the role that culture plays in life, students work on close reading, summarizing, interpreting, note taking, and group process abilities.

In the middle-level course, College Culture and Thought, students learn the concepts of culture, norms, and values. From that foundation, readings then introduce students to the many experiences of the members of the campus community. In one reading, author Earl Shorris introduces a sociological view of why people have such a hard time escaping poverty. He argues that poor people do not need simple job training; instead, they benefit from a rigorous, traditional course in the Humanities: history, philosophy, logic, and the arts. Students grapple with Shorris' ideas; some classes choose to read Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* because Shorris mentions it as important to his students' learning. For some students, the metaphor of the cave is a way to understand their own life situations and their goals for education. Readings such as this one introduce students to the culture of the college community and invite them to analyze, evaluate, and use those cultural elements.

Students also often lack an understanding of the academic organization of knowledge and the basic concepts of the disciplines that are bound up in hidden rules, codes, and discourses. What counts as evidence in a chemistry paper, for example, is different than what counts as evidence in a literary analysis. Each discipline takes a specialized approach to studying the world. Readings provide discussions of the key issues within a discipline and provide specific examples of thinking within disciplines. At the end of any or all of the three reading- and writing-intensive developmental courses in the SCC sequence, students have a much more complete picture of what they are getting into in college as well as improved reading, writing, thinking, and learning skills.

To conclude, SCC's developmental program is based on seven principles:

1. Students need to read whole college-level texts.
2. They need to see the connections between the abilities and content they learn and their present and future lives.
3. They need to understand the values and organizational systems that permeate college life.
4. They need content that helps them learn important background knowledge about college culture and the disciplines.
5. They need to engage in the consideration of big ideas.

6. They need to develop confidence by reading (and composing) intellectually challenging, sophisticated texts.
7. They need to be expected to think and learn like the adults they are.

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