

UC Merced

Creating Academic Community for First-Generation College Students: A Graduate Student Instructor Guidebook

Title

Pulling Back the Curtain on College-Level Literacy Skills

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7qn352n5>

Author

Hernandez-Jason, Beth

Publication Date

2010-11-01

Peer reviewed

CREATING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS A Graduate Student Instructor Guidebook

Pulling Back the Curtain on College-Level Literacy Skills

Beth Hernandez-Jason*

World Cultures Program

Center for Research on Teaching Excellence Graduate Teaching Fellow

This article outlines the benefits of self-reflection and skill-building exercises in freshman-intensive courses, with particular focus on reading assessment activities. As literacy practices are critical to one's sense of academic community, all instructors have a responsibility to address writing style, organization and reading skills applicable to a given discipline. This is of particular importance to freshman, first-generation and transfer students who are making the most intensive transition to university life. Prior knowledge assessment benefits instructors in determining skills needs, with students also gaining voice and confidence. Part of the "pulling back the curtain" concept is explaining expectations (via rubrics) and modeling successful practices. This article concludes with an affective reading survey and best practices list.

Sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education,
Future Faculty Grant P116V090031



* Copyright @ 2010 the Berkeley Electronic Press. All rights reserved.

Pulling Back the Curtain on College-Level Literacy Skills

By Beth Hernandez-Jason

When you think of *The Wizard of Oz*, what do you remember: The yellow brick road, the red slippers, or “there’s no place like home”? I think of the moment when we discover that the mysterious and terrifying Wizard of Oz, a looming projected face with a booming voice, is really Professor Marvel, the fortune teller Dorothy met in Kansas. Toto the dog pulls back the curtain and the “Wizard” is exposed for who he really is—a gentle old man who is a bit foolish. Perhaps the reason why the Wizard of Oz resonates so strongly with many of us is because it is about negotiating new territory—from black and white Kansas to Technicolor Oz. For many students, like Dorothy, college transitions are overwhelming and unfamiliar. However, we can adopt several self-reflection and skill-building exercises in our classrooms to help students more confidently navigate through Oz. To do this, I suggest that we identify students’ prior knowledge and reveal our expectations. Because the pathway to success in so many entry-level college courses relates to college-level reading, I will highlight activities that support literacy assessment and skill-building.

Why should we be more explicit about the teaching and learning process in freshman-intensive courses? To put it simply, students have a better chance of being successful in college when we use these techniques. Students arrive with a range of literacy levels, study skills and attitudes towards learning; rather than simply complain about these challenges, we can learn new teaching methods that will increase student confidence and improve their critical thinking skills and literacy. Ann Penrose explains that “because literacy practices enact the values and customs of a community, they represent a critical site of vulnerability for those who are uncertain of their membership [e.g., membership in the world of academia]” (457). In other words, when students realize that they are not reading and writing at the college level, exclusion becomes a deep-set fear. This issue may be particularly acute for students who cannot turn to family members or friends for reassurance or advice. If students cannot contextualize the difficulties of transitioning to college and access associated resources, like writing centers, tutors and faculty office hours, then they are not likely to persist.

Many undergraduates are able to acquire the literacy and study skills needed to succeed in college, yet those who struggle to do so would benefit from clearer expectations and consistent feedback in all of their classes. Mike Rose suggests in *Why School?* (2009) that teachers address writing style, organization and reading skills “in the context of their academic writing,” so that students are focused on meaningful ideas and not simply grammar (130). This concept can be expanded to say that faculty can teach discipline-specific reading, writing and thinking skills through their typical assignments, rather than expecting composition and literature courses to take care of reading and writing skill acquisition. Because different classes require specialized ways of reading,

writing and studying, we should explain and model these practices, particularly in lower-division classes. It is also helpful to continue to clarify your expectations in upper-division courses as well in order to help refresh everyone's memory. Transfer and first-generation students benefit greatly from this approach, as no one is singled out; in my experience, all students need these reminders as a matter of continuity. Above all, this transparency will be most effective if we first find out what our students already know about reading, note-taking, and other important skills.

Assessing prior knowledge and attitudes

...it is important when we introduce new materials or applications that we have students discuss what they already know about a topic, as well as the experiences that led to their knowledge. It may also be helpful in some situations to have students discuss how they *feel* about a topic (Huba and Freed 49, emphasis mine).

In order to help determine what students already know, I propose that we consider affective as well as the more typical cognitive assessment (i.e. grading) in order to find out what attitudes students bring to the activities of reading and writing, and perhaps even to the subject material in general. Affective assessment, according to Susannah Givens, focuses on "an individual's motivation, attitude toward learning, and feelings of self-efficacy" (6). Thus, a survey given at the beginning of the semester could determine students' prior cognitive knowledge, attitudes towards the subject matter, and current study strategies. Another way to find out what students already know is to ask them in a discussion format. However, this might not be the optimal way to ask questions about attitudes or feelings, so a written survey (see *Appendix A*) or even a minute paper might be the best way to approach that. To create a learner-centered approach, we can ask students to fill us in on what they already know about: evolution, France, writing a paper, reading strategies, Cervantes, feminism, or a mathematical theorem. This accomplishes several things: we encourage students to become active participants; we learn what students have read/seen; we know what might need to be unlearned or adjusted; we allow students to be teachers; students can learn from other students.

When appropriate, we can also encourage students to share their personal experiences when it is relevant to the topic. According to Rashné Jehangier, connecting "head" and "heart" knowledge can help students with deeper comprehension and retention of knowledge:

affective and cognitive knowing gives students a deeper understanding of conceptual issues because the stories and life experiences are either reflective of or contrary to the material being studied in the classroom. Consequently, students

are actively engaged in critical thinking to make sense of multiple perspectives (47).

Perhaps most importantly, when we take the time to discover and acknowledge what students already know, we reverse the “banking” method of education in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 72). Acknowledging prior knowledge is particularly important for students who are not sure if they belong in college or who have low self-confidence. However, this activity or principle should be undertaken in conjunction with the next—sharing with your students the academic strategies they will need to succeed in your course.

Pulling Back the Curtain

...though professors may like to teach, like to talk about the knowledge they've worked so hard to acquire, it is pretty unlikely that they have been encouraged to think about, say, the cognitive difficulties young people have as they learn how to conduct inquiry in physics or anthropology or linguistics, the way biological or historical knowledge is acquired, the reading or writing difficulties that attend the development of philosophical reasoning. These issues, if addressed at all in the academy, are addressed in schools of education, and most faculty hold schools of education in low regard. (Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*, 196)

As a graduate student, my first year was spent learning new reading, writing and note-taking skills. I realized early on that the skills I had acquired as an undergraduate were no longer sufficient—I needed new methods to deal with a huge reading load, seminars that required active participation, and twenty-page papers. I also spent time learning what each teacher expected of me in terms of my writing and class participation. Undergraduate students are often similarly underprepared, yet if they do not know how to get the help they need, or if they feel like they are the only one struggling, they will continue to flounder. Students may also find that what works in Introduction to Biology does not work in U.S. Literature—how we read a biology textbook is vastly different from how we read a novel, a poem, or a scholarly article, and how we take notes on these texts is also specialized. Therefore, in different classes, before we delve into the content, I suggest we find out what students think they should do to approach a text or assignment -- access prior knowledge. Then, if we find that they do not know how to read a text in our discipline in the way that we expect, or if they are unfamiliar with Cornell note-taking or annotating, we should explain why it is important that they read/take notes and then model different strategies. Share different methods you are familiar with, and research other methods that might work for different types of learners (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic). You might pull out an old notebook of yours with notes to show your

students (or just to refresh your memory), or show them an article that you have annotated (see *Appendix B: 10 Ideas* for more ideas).

It is also helpful to be explicit about assignments—your expectations, how to approach it, and how it will be graded. When students are about to begin working on a paper or project, consider asking them to help you come up with a grading rubric, or even the topic. Take some time in class to talk over the assignment and show examples of prior student work that met expectations in terms of content, organization, grammar and writing style. You can show them an excerpt in class if you are worried that they might simply copy the example. Huba and Freed state that rubrics enhance “students’ ability to self-assess and self-correct,” and including students in the formation of rubrics “conveys respect for students as people and builds student ownership for learning” (170). When we also allow input into the actual topic of the assignment (either before or after) we increase our chances of assigning work that is relevant to the students. You might come up with several options and ask them to choose one, or ask them to write out a sample essay question to turn in. This can also work with quizzes and tests. For example, I plan on asking my students in Intermediate Spanish to write quiz questions as a homework assignment, which will promote thinking about what we have been learning, and what might be on the quiz. This method encourages students to actively participate in their learning, and feel more familiar with the material and confident about your expectations.

One of the most challenging elements to change in a course is the learning dynamic. We may start the year out intending to focus on dialogic discussions, yet our students do not “cooperate.” If we do not begin the class (and continue throughout the semester) by explaining to students our teaching method, it is less likely that we will succeed in transforming a traditional classroom dynamic because students are not on the same page. Therefore, if we want to have a class that is markedly different from most high school classrooms, or even a learner-centered classroom (see Huba and Freed’s *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses*), our first job is to explain what we are doing and why: “...when we shift from the traditional teacher-centered paradigm to a learner-centered paradigm, it is important that we discuss the process and the reasons for it with students” (Huba and Freed 51). bell hooks also notes that in a “transformed classroom there is often a much greater need to explain philosophy, strategy, intent” (42). She emphasizes that students may not even enjoy a class that employs a learner-centered teaching method at first: “In my professorial role I had to surrender my need for immediate affirmation of successful teaching... and accept that some students may not appreciate the value of a certain standpoint or process straightaway” (42). By talking about how we teach and learn, we encourage students to think critically about what they are learning and *how* they are learning it. This may invite questions that teachers are not used to hearing (“Why are we reading *this* book?” “How does the author know that?”), but in the world of academia, this is an intellectual challenge, not a threat. We should encourage our students to think critically, which is a skill they will need in the future.

When we open up to students, when we share some of our tips and “tricks” for navigating academia, some of their fears and doubts about school dissipate, and they are free to enjoy learning. Rather than typing up lectures, we can focus on questions that elicit complex answers, as our students become active learners. Instead of assuming our students know how to write an essay or report, we can treat them as adults and take time to discuss what professionals in our field expect, and why. We can critically examine what we teach and what approach we use in order to prepare for students who might have different frames of reference. All of this is done with the belief that we are here to teach whoever is in front of us, and that whoever is in front of us belongs here. When we pull back the curtain on academia, students can engage with us as fellow learners, and we are free to learn from them.

Appendix A

Below are some tools to use in your classroom to help you find out what prior knowledge and attitudes students have with regards to reading and note-taking habits, as well as ways to make academic expectations clearer.

Student Reading Survey

(Adapted from WestEd Reading Apprenticeship Literacy Initiative, 2004 and "Reading Attitudes Survey" from "Using Affective Assessment to Understand our Students' Identities as Readers (and Non-Readers)" by Susannah M. Givens. Givens suggests giving the students the Reading Attitudes Survey during the first week or two of class, and explaining why you are administering it: "to learn more about who they are as readers and that the surveys tell me much more about them as individuals than a single standardized measure or writing sample" (8).)

Thank you for completing this survey! Your answers will remain anonymous (your results will not be associated with your name) and you will only be graded for completing the survey, not for "right" or "wrong" answers.

1. Please describe one of your earliest memories of reading:

2. From what you can remember, learning how to read was

very easy easy hard very hard

3. What do you usually do when you read? (**check ALL** the ones that describe what you do)

- I read silently
- I try to figure out the meaning of words I don't know
- I look over what I'm going to read first to get an idea of what it is about.
- I read aloud to myself in a quiet voice
- I picture what is happening in the book
- I look up words I don't know in the dictionary.
- I get distracted easily.
- I ask myself questions about what I'm reading.
- I read to myself with expression
- I have trouble remembering what I read
- I try to understand what I read
- I put what I'm reading into my own words

- I try to get the reading over with as fast as I can
- I read a section again if I didn't understand it at first
- I try to concentrate on the reading
- I think about the things I know that connect to the reading (movies, other books, personal experiences)

4. What do you think someone has to do to be a good reader? (check **ONLY the 3 most** important ones)

- read aloud well enjoy reading understand what they read
- read with expression read a lot concentrate on the reading
- pronounce all the words correctly read harder books read fast know the meaning of most of the words read different kinds of books
- know when they are having trouble understanding
- use strategies to improve their understanding Other:

5. Do you think you are a good reader?

- Yes No It depends

Explain why:

6. Do you think that reading is important for your major?

- Yes No

7. What is your planned major, or favorite school subject?

8. Do you read in a language other than English?

- Yes No a) If yes, which language(s)?

9. What kinds of things do you read OUTSIDE of school? (**Check all** that apply)

- newspapers letters/email comic books blogs
- short stories magazines song lyrics poetry
- novels computer manuals non-fiction nothing
- Other:

10. Which of the following most accurately describes how you feel about reading that is **not assigned** (i.e. reading something you have chosen during your free time)?

- Excited Bored Inadequate/insecure Comfortable
 Embarrassed Calm/relaxed Stressed Productive Lazy
 None- I avoid reading whenever possible. Other: _____

11. What best describes your family's attitude toward reading? (check **all** that apply)

- They encourage me to read They prefer I do other things They enjoy reading
 They do not enjoy reading Other: _____

12. What best describes your friends' attitude toward reading? (check **all** that apply)

- They encourage me to read They prefer I do other things They enjoy reading
 They do not enjoy reading Other: _____

14. Which of the following most accurately describes how you feel about reading something that **is assigned** in class?

- Excited Bored Inadequate/insecure Comfortable
 Embarrassed Calm/relaxed Stressed
 Productive Lazy Other: _____

15. What kinds of books do you like to read? (check **all** the ones you like)

- science fiction adventure/action poetry sports
 thrillers short stories romance horror
 picture books comic books fantasy/myth humor
 how to books science/nature (auto)biography
 history religious mysteries/detective
 none Other: _____

16. How do you choose a book to read? (check **all** the ones that describe what you do)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> look for an interesting title | <input type="checkbox"/> on-sale |
| <input type="checkbox"/> see how long the book is | <input type="checkbox"/> read reviews/summaries online |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ask a librarian/teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> look for books I've heard about |
| <input type="checkbox"/> look at pictures on cover/inside | <input type="checkbox"/> by genre/type (suspense, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> pick a book that looks easy | <input type="checkbox"/> look for books about my culture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ask a family member | <input type="checkbox"/> books that have been made into movies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> see if it has won an award | <input type="checkbox"/> I have no method of choosing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> look for a certain author | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ask a friend/classmate | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> read the book jacket | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> choose by topic | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | |
-

17. Where did you buy/borrow books to read as a child? (**Check all** that apply)
 home school public library book store Other:

18. Who do you talk to about books you have read? (**Check all** that apply)
 Friends Family members Teachers No one
19. What do you do to help you remember what you read?
20. Think about what you would like to learn from this course to help you become a better reader. List one or two goals that you would like to set for yourself to accomplish in this course.

Appendix B: 10 Ideas

1. As a class, come up with a grading rubric for assigned papers. Consider sharing an anonymous example of an “A” paper from prior years.
2. Ask students to share their note-taking strategies for lectures and at-home reading. If they are not familiar with different strategies, introduce them to the Cornell method, outlining, and mapping. Consider assigning “note-taking” as homework for the first week of class.
3. Ask students to share their strategies for writing a paper, studying for a test, or preparing for a presentation. Share your strategies—and perhaps mention mistakes you have made as well as what works for you.
4. Encourage students to reflect on what they think the learning process should look like. Discuss your teaching style and expectations, and how that may differ from what students might be used to.
5. Discuss with students why you choose texts/topics, and invite suggestions and comments (perhaps in an anonymous survey). Talk about your approach to teaching (learner-oriented, teacher-oriented, Socratic method, discussion format, etc.) and acknowledge that it might be uncomfortable at first for students.
6. Elicit feedback, and show students it matters. Conduct anonymous online surveys, ask students to write down the “muddiest point” (the part they understand the least), and read your course evaluations. Try to incorporate some suggestions, and mention it when you do so.
7. Have high expectations, and engage students in ideas that are meaningful and relevant to them.
8. Encourage students (in ALL disciplines) to go to the Writing Center with a first draft of any written assignment. Consider assigning it as homework.
9. Consider how you use assigned reading in your lecture/discussion. How do you know students are doing the reading? Possible motivational ideas: a) introduce the reading in class to get them excited about it, b) conduct short (one question) reading quizzes each day or sporadically. Warn students in advance c) make sure you discuss what they read at home, and ask questions to find out if they read and understood. Wait long enough for them to answer, or call on different people. Try to be comfortable with long pauses d) reconsider what texts you are assigning. Are they relevant? Are they engaging? Is it busy work or important?
 - a. In *Why School?*, Mike Rose suggests asking yourself what you want to achieve through teaching a text, what students have read prior to this, and “Does my syllabus reflect in some way the cultural histories of the students before me,” and reflect on your own experiences with the text you are teaching (110-114). What worked and what didn’t when you first read it or were taught a specific concept?
10. Remind yourself of your teaching philosophy. What are your basic beliefs about education and teaching? Can you post this in your office, or in the classroom?

Works Cited

- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 1970. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2000.
- Givens, Susannah M. "Using Affective Assessment to Understand our Students' Identities as Readers (and Non-Readers)," *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*. 15.5 (2010): 5-19.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Huba, Mary E. and Jann E. Freed. *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.
- Jehangir, Rashné R. "Cultivating Voice: First-Generation Students Seek Full Academic Citizenship in Multicultural Learning Communities," *Innovative Higher Education* (2009): 33-49.
- Penrose, Ann M. "Academic Literacy Perceptions and Performance: Comparing First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Students," *Research in the Teaching of English* 36.4 (2002): 437-461.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: The Free Press, 1989.
- . *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York, The New Press, 2009.
- Williamson, Gary L. "A Text Readability Continuum for Postsecondary Readiness" in *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 19.4 (2008): 602-632.