

The following essay is adapted from a 2011 keynote speech to the English Council of California Two-Year Colleges. The theme of that year's conference: "Meeting in the Margins: Discourses on Reading and Writing."

Unleashing Students' Capacity through Acceleration

By Katie Hern

A few years ago, I had the chance to sit in on a developmental reading class at another community college. It was the lowest level of their curriculum, four courses below college composition, and I was curious to see what happened there. The college's demographics were similar to my home institution, Chabot College, serving a poor to working-class community, with a high percentage of students of color and immigrants. But this course has no counterpart at my college. At Chabot, reading and writing are integrated, and most developmental students enroll in just a single course before college English.

Directed by the instructor, the students took out their reading-comprehension textbooks and opened to that day's section. Their job was to read a paragraph. It seems implausible as I look back, but I believe this paragraph involved tulips in 15th century Holland. That's my memory at least. After reading, they were to work in groups to label each sentence in the paragraph as "main idea" or "supporting detail." The groups then reported their answers back to the class, and the teacher noted whether or not the answers were correct. When they finished, they moved on to reading and labeling another

paragraph on a completely unrelated topic – this time, perhaps, social changes brought on by the U.S. industrial revolution.

By some measures, the class I observed went well. The teacher was polite to the students. The students seemed to have a rapport with each other. They stayed on task during the small-group activities. And yet, I left that classroom upset and agitated. In describing why, I'm afraid I may offend some of you. By way of explanation, I'll say I am originally from the Boston area, and even by Yankee standards, I'm direct. But more than that, I feel an urgency to name things as unflinchingly as possible here.

The class I observed was on the margins of the college landscape. The students came from under-represented groups on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Their placement scores put them two years away from a college-level course in English and blocked them from many general education classes. A lot of them likely made it through high school without ever having read a full book, and they no doubt needed to work on the conventions of formal written English.

But what's more important here is that the curriculum itself was marginal. What I mean is it was radically disconnected from the core purposes and habits of mind of a college education. There was no world of ideas in that classroom. No sense that reading was a way to join a larger discussion of issues that matter. No opportunity for students to climb into the upper reaches of Bloom's taxonomy, weigh conflicting evidence, and develop their own well-informed viewpoints. The tasks students were given bore little relation to the kinds of reading, thinking, and writing they would see in a good college-level course. If, that is, they could ever *make it* to a good college-level course.

As community college English teachers, we have a particularly important role in the higher education landscape. We are custodians of the open-doors mission of the community college. Our classes provide students access to significant social capital – the ability to understand and engage with complex texts, the confidence to express their own ideas, fluency in the conventions of academic exchange. At their best, our classes can be gateways to expanded educational and career opportunities.

To fulfill this purpose, however, we need to break from the model of education embodied in that reading class, four levels below college English. Some of you have already made this break, but others may be imprisoned inside departmentally approved curricula that look very much like the classroom I described. If so, I hope you'll take this as an invitation to pry apart the bars holding you and your students back.

The biggest problem of these classrooms is that they ask so very little of students. Reading and writing just a paragraph at a time. Focusing not on meaning, but on de-contextualized sub-skills like recognizing a main idea, or writing a topic sentence. These classes start with the assumption that students can't handle academic challenges, and then provide such low-level tasks that students never get to show us they can do more. This is a big part of why I've become an evangelist for acceleration. We need to stop teaching down to students and start tapping their capacity.

I'd like to share some video of students in my accelerated, integrated reading and writing class. This is a one-semester, 4-unit course one-level below college English, and there is no minimum placement score or pre-requisite. The class includes students who skipped the placement test, students who really should have been in college English,

students scoring at the very bottom of Accuplacer scales, and everyone in between. It's week two, the fourth class of the semester, and they are discussing an excerpt from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Hern, 2009). This is the chapter in which Freire introduces what he calls "banking model" education – in which teachers deposit inert information into the empty vessels of their students' minds, and students categorize and store this knowledge for later retrieval. Freire contrasts this approach with what he calls "problem posing education," a model in which students are fully humanized, active co-creators of meaning, wrestling to make sense of their world in partnership with their teachers. The Freire chapter is challenging – full of abstract language and philosophical terminology, with few concrete examples to ground the discussion, the kind of thing you read in a graduate education program. As you watch the video, I'd like you to pay attention for the capacity students are demonstrating.

These are developmental students. There's a lot they aren't getting in Freire's argument – unfamiliar vocabulary, confusion about what he means by "problem-posing." But there is a lot that they *are* getting. One student -- a Latino guy in a skull t-shirt -- applies Freire's concepts to his own experience, and a light bulb goes off: "Wait a minute! I get what's going on here now!" A young African-American woman in his group sums up the banking model beautifully: "You copy. You're just copying. You ain't even taking in. You're just writing down: A, B, C." And a Latina woman in a baseball cap provides a succinct closure comment about why people educated with the banking model would be easier to oppress: "they just listen and do what they're being told."

Watching this video, I'm aware of ways I've developed as a teacher over the years. It used to make me so tense when students would come out with a misreading

during class. I'm more comfortable now with the role of coach and facilitator, posing questions, naming reading strategies I see them using, suggesting additional strategies to try, not freaking out when students don't get it right away. But it's a work in progress. There's a moment in this video where I stop in the middle of a sentence, catching myself in the impulse to jump in and just give them the answer.

Watching the video, I'm also conscious of missed moments in my teaching that day. I wished I'd been more dialed in when an African-American student launched into word play on the meaning of oppression – “you ain't got no jobs, you got a *recession*, a *depression*.” He was employing a good technique – using word roots to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary – and it would have been great to call that out and celebrate it, so that other students could add this strategy to their repertoire as readers.

I wish too that I had been more clear about why students were struggling with Freire's idea of “problem posing.” (“I thought about that over and over last night,” says one African-American woman, “and I couldn't think of nothing.”) The issue, I now see, was that they were thinking about one meaning of the word problem – a thing that needs to be fixed – and they weren't aware that there is an alternative use of that word in academic circles, where “problem” is an exciting intellectual challenge. Because of this, they couldn't understand why Freire would find problems liberating. If I could go back, I'd let the whole conversation unfold exactly as it did, but then wrap up by naming what was giving the students difficulty, so that they could be more conscious of this as a potential source of confusion in their reading.

This is a video where students are grappling, imperfectly, with challenging material, and the teacher is grappling, imperfectly, with how to guide them toward better understanding and stronger skills. They may be developmental students, but they are capable of discussing substantive issues. In fact, it's the substantive issues that motivate students to care about things like context clues and thesis statements. They are interested in what they're reading. And they feel like they're in college.

For me, this is a non-negotiable part of being an English teacher. We have to provide meaningful content for students to engage. Our classes can't be *about* topic sentences. Topic sentences just aren't that interesting. And neither are thesis statements, or brainstorming strategies, or subject-verb agreement, or any of the other sub-skills that, as a field, we tend to fixate on.

Another non-negotiable for me is that we require students to read and write *a lot*. That's another place where I think we have fallen short as a field. We all know that the only way to become a stronger reader and writer is through practice. Yet the practice our classrooms provide is often sadly limited. It's not enough to ask students to read a handful of short articles and then spend several weeks on an elaborate process for writing a three-page essay.

I need to fess up here that I'm talking about my own former teaching-self. For the first ten years of my professional life, I called myself a "writing teacher" and my classes required students to read only short articles and excerpts, probably less than 75 pages total. That changed when I started teaching at Chabot College, where reading and writing instruction is integrated, and the English department requires at least one full-length book

be taught at every level, including developmental classes. Many of my colleagues have developmental students read two or three books, plus assorted short pieces to complement them.

I have followed their lead and increased the amount of reading in my classes over time. Here's the reading list from my current accelerated course.

Figure 1: Texts Assigned
“Reading, Reasoning, Writing (Accelerated)”
Chabot College, Katie Hern, Fall 2011

Theme: Human Psychology & What Makes Us Tick

Total Required Reading: 500-600 pages

3 Non-Fiction Books

1. Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us by Daniel Pink (Students read 6 chapters)
2. Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the 20th Century by Lauren Slater (Students read 6 chapters)
3. One Psychology-Related Memoir (Students read complete book of their choice from list below)

Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines, by Nic Sheff

Madness: A Bipolar Life, by Marya Hornbacher

Danger to Self: On the Frontline with an ER Psychiatrist, by Paul Linde

Scholarly and Critical Articles

- “From *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work*” by Jean Anyon
- “From *The Perils of Obedience*” by Stanley Milgram, along with 2 critical reviews of Milgram's experiment by psychologists Baumrind and Herrnstein
- Two reviews of the class text *Opening Skinner's Box*
- Online materials to supplement key chapters of the Slater text

I've also increased the volume and types of writing in my class. There are in-class and at-home essays, lower-stakes ungraded work and more formal assignments. Instead of my previous approach of assigning a few papers with extensive pre-writing and revising processes, we do more papers with faster turn-arounds.

Figure 2: Major Tests and Assignments

1 Group Presentation of chapter from book *Drive* – ungraded

3-4 Reading Quizzes – open-book, letter graded re: accuracy and completeness of answers about ideas/info from each unit's texts

8 Papers of Different Types

- Educational Autobiography – ungraded, in-class essay
- Critical Response – ungraded, in-class essay, 1-2 pages
- 3 Synthesis Essays Involving Class Texts – out-of-class essays, 3-4 pages each, assessed *High Pass, Pass, Low Pass, Not Yet Passing, Rewrite*
- 1 Essay Analyzing the Students' Chosen Memoir – out-of-class essay, 3-4 pages, assessed *High Pass, Pass, Low Pass, Not Yet Passing, Rewrite*
- 1 Self-Reflection Paper about their Learning -- ungraded, in-class essay
- Final Exam – in-class essay evaluating primary course text, assessed *High Pass, Pass, Low Pass, Not Yet Passing, Rewrite*

You may be surprised by the volume and level of work in this class. It's more than what was required in freshman composition classes at the four-year university where I first began teaching. Plus, this is an open-access class, and my students might be placed two, three, or four courses away from college English at your school. You may be thinking

about your own developmental students and worried that they'd feel overwhelmed, that they might not be able to handle these demands.

Let me say that I do think we need to be careful about *how* we integrate challenging work into the class. We don't want to just dump a synthesis essay on students without having provided in-class activities that help them know how to approach it. I'll talk more about this in a bit. But I want to say here that students are much more capable than our placement tests and low-level courses often lead us to assume.

For evidence, I turn again to my students. I've taught the accelerated class with these materials for a couple years now, and during the last three semesters, 72-88% of my students have passed the course with a C or better.

Figure 3: Success Rates

Spring 2010	Fall 2010	Spring 2011
Success rate: 72%	Success rate: 80%	Success rate: 88%
Enrollment at Census: 29 (Week 3)	Enrollment at Census: 30 (Week 3)	Enrollment at Census: 25 (Week 3)
Pass: 21 No Pass: 4 Withdrawal: 4	Pass: 24 No Pass: 5 Withdrawal: 1	Pass: 22 No Pass: 2 Withdrawal: 1

Pass = C or higher

My pass rates haven't always been this high. I did an inquiry project a few years back into what I came to call the "Academic Sustainability Gap." In 2005, I taught three sections of the accelerated class inside a learning community. I had poured my heart and soul into this program, and at the end of the semester, only 55% of the students passed.

That 55% became my own personal baseline, a number I've worked to improve over the last six years.

Two areas have been especially important in increasing my pass rates.

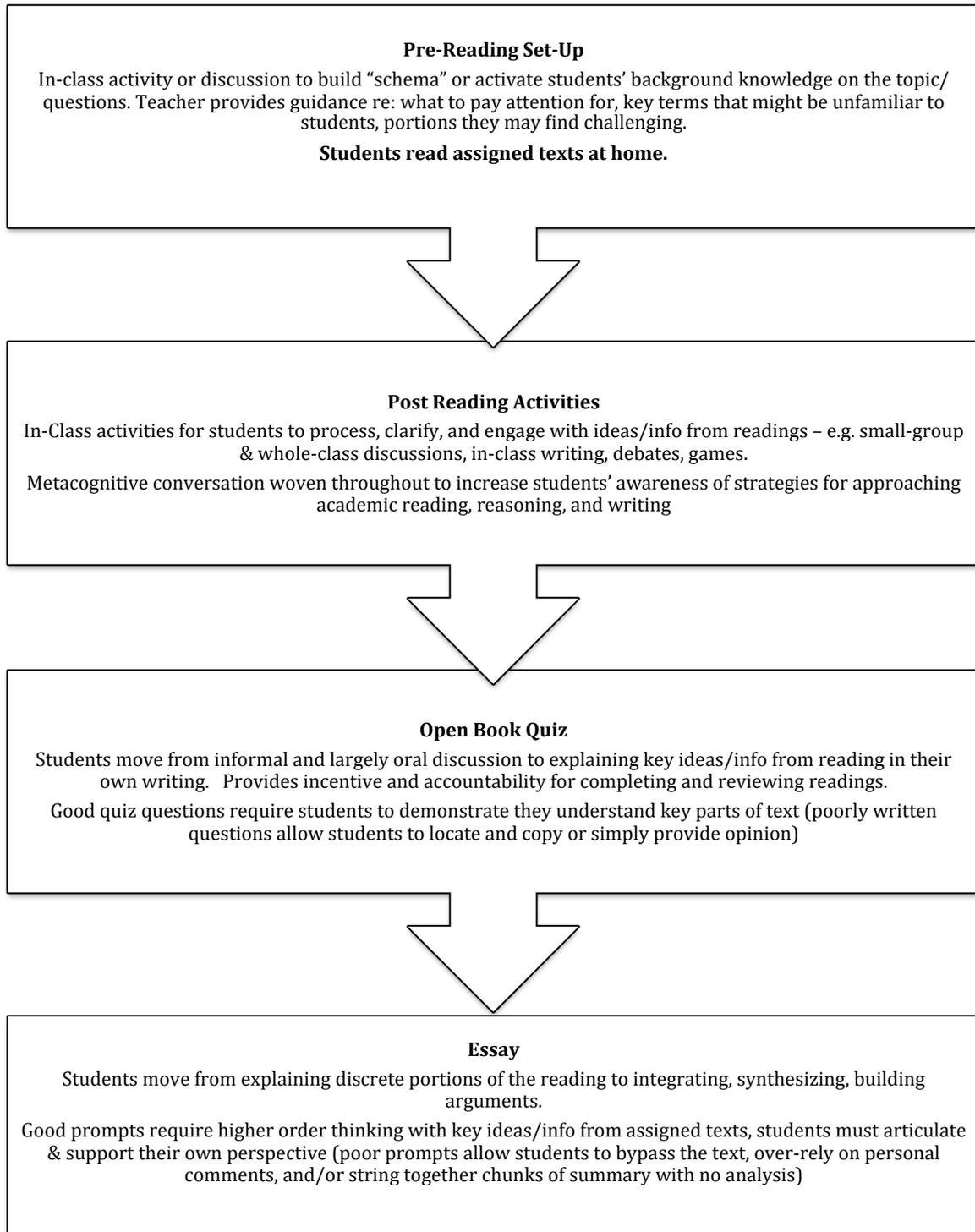
First, I realized that I had been making some unconscious assumptions about my students as readers. I'm almost embarrassed to admit them here, in a room full of seasoned community college teachers, but when I began teaching at Chabot, I assumed that my students would: 1) do the reading I assigned, 2) understand it, 3) ask questions if they didn't understand something. I have learned that these are flawed assumptions.

More important, I've learned that one of the most high-leverage ways to use class time is to give students the chance to actively process what they've read, the way students are doing in the Freire video. They can handle challenging readings, but they need to talk them through, express the author's points in their own words, hear what other students think, and receive occasional guidance and clarification from the teacher.

That's pretty much what we do in class every day. They might work in small groups to collaboratively answer questions. They might get into debate teams and argue that Stanley Milgram's obedience experiment was – or was not – a good experiment. Or they might do “speed dating” where they face each other in pairs and spend three minutes talking about a topic from the reading, then switch partners and topics several times over. For each unit, once we've informally discussed the readings, I give an open-book quiz, and then students write an essay integrating those readings. Figure 4 features a diagram of the instructional cycle I use in my classes.

Figure 4: Instructional Cycle

Cycle repeated for each major unit of the course



The power of this cycle is that students get multiple chances to engage with the readings. They can clarify parts they hadn't understood, develop a sense of ownership over the material, and formulate their own positions on the issues at hand. By the time that essay comes around, they *know* those readings, and their essays are rich with ideas and information drawn from them.

One of the most clear signs that this process works is the virtual disappearance of something that previously had been a chronic problem in students' papers – quotes stuck into paragraphs where they made no sense. I used to interpret this as a writing problem and respond to it by explaining (and re-explaining) the technique for integrating quotes smoothly into one's writing. But I realize now that it was actually a *reading* problem. Students hadn't understood the quote they were using, so of course it didn't make sense in the flow of their paper. Now that so much class time is devoted to actively working with the assigned texts, students are not only less likely to quote randomly, they will often choose not to quote at all, instead explaining ideas and information in their own words, a beautiful sign of how deeply they've integrated what they read.

The other big factor in increasing my own pass rates is that I've become better at dealing with the emotional dimensions of student learning, especially student fear. A quick plug here for Rebecca Cox's book *The College Fear Factor* – an incredible qualitative study of community college students' fear and how it plays out in the classroom.

When faculty from other colleges first hear about Chabot's accelerated course, they often have a hard time believing that students could develop the reading and writing skills to move on to college English in just one semester. But many of us who teach the course have noticed that students' literacy is usually not the biggest factor in whether they pass. It's more about whether they come to class, do the reading, turn in their papers, write more than one draft. Sometimes we refer to these as "student-ing skills," sometimes as "motivation" or "effort." But all of these terms carry a tinge of moral judgment that can obscure what I think is driving students' behavior.

The video provides a good illustration of what I'm getting at. The day we discussed Freire was amazing (which was lucky, since I'd forgotten that the student camera person was coming). When I did our regular "fess up" at the beginning of class, 100% of the students reported that they had read the Freire article for homework. Students were so loudly engaged it was hard to hear the audio. They felt comfortable saying they were lost. They were willing to talk their way through and figure out Freire's meaning as best they could. They demonstrated what is sometimes called "productive persistence," hanging in there and continuing to try when you're not getting something right away.

What's important to know here is what happened in the class *before* this. That day's reading assignment was Mike Rose's "I Just Wanna Be Average," and when I asked them to "fess up" if they didn't do the reading, 2/3rds of the room raised their hands. My first response was a flare of anger and judgment. It was only the third class of the semester, and already this many students were not doing the reading? Luckily, I caught myself before launching into a tirade, and I asked a follow up question: When

they said they didn't read, did they mean that they didn't even try? Or that they started and then gave up? Overwhelmingly, they had tried, gotten discouraged, and stopped.

This is an incredibly important thing to understand about our students. Rebecca Cox's research shows that community college students often arrive at our open doors feeling deeply insecure that they are not really "college material," a feeling reinforced by their placement in remedial courses. They are terrified of being found out, and they will often cope with this fear by evading assessment -- not turning in papers, skipping tests. When they encounter a difficult task, or receive critical feedback, or start to feel hopeless, they often disengage and even disappear.

Educational Psychologist Carol Dweck's research is also helpful in understanding these dynamics. Students who have what Dweck calls a "growth-mindset" about intelligence believe that intelligence is something they can *develop*, and they are more likely to engage challenge, invest effort, and learn more. Students with a "fixed mindset," on the other hand, see expending effort as a sign of lower intelligence, avoid challenges they fear may subject them to exposure, and ultimately learn less. The related idea of "self-handicapping" is also relevant here. Not studying, being intoxicated while writing a paper, avoiding the reading – all of these are, ironically, ways students protect their self-worth. After all, it doesn't hurt to fail if you barely tried.

All of this was at play in students' response to the Mike Rose essay, but then two things helped the Freire discussion go differently. First, I gave them some guidance about what I wanted them to pay attention for, a few simple questions about the reading. What does the author mean by "banking model" education and why does he say it's oppressive? And what does he mean by "problem posing" and why does he say it's

liberatory? The questions helped students stay moored when they'd start to get lost in Freire's language.

More important, though, was that before I sent students home to read Freire, I let them know that I had chosen the article *because* it was difficult. They could all read *People* magazine, but that wasn't going to help them grow as readers and become skilled with dense college-level texts. I said I knew they wouldn't understand everything but that I wanted them to read the whole thing and do the best they could, and then we'd work with it together in class. This conversation defused the reflexive shame that is often triggered when students don't understand something they've read – “I should get this, I'm in college” – and opened up the space for the productive persistence you saw. Instead of withdrawing in the face of difficult material, they engaged it more deeply.

This is an example of the idea I mentioned earlier – that it's important to be intentional about *how* we integrate challenging material into the class. It's also an example of one of the core principles of Chabot's curriculum – the idea that developmental students should do the same kinds of reading, thinking, and writing they'll do in the college-level course, but with more scaffolding and support to help them be successful.

I want to go back to that list of assignments from my accelerated course (Figure 2). Notice that the first few assignments are ungraded and completed in class. This is my response to a pattern I'd seen in my sustainability gap inquiry – that a significant group of students would, as Cox described, try to avoid assessment, missing class on the day of a quiz, not turning in papers. Making the first few assessments ungraded and low-stakes – a

group presentation, a paper reflecting on their own education, a short summary-response – reduces the level of fear in the room, and students begin the semester already on track, having turned in several assignments. It also gives me, as a teacher, the chance to see their work, point out strengths, and encourage them. All of helps lower the fear and make it feel safe for students to try.

The other thing I'd like to point out is that papers in my accelerated class are not letter graded – even the formal synthesis essays are assessed on the spectrum from “High pass” to “Not yet passing” and “Rewrite.” That was one of the many changes I made after my semester of the 55% pass rate. It's an approach adapted from a colleague at Chabot who I noticed had very high student retention at the end of the semester. Before observing her class and asking about what she was doing, I'd give weak papers a C, C-, D+, with notes about how to improve them and encouragement to submit a revision. The class is pass-no pass, but I wanted to let students know where their writing stood, and motivate them to improve. But what happened is that, instead of revising and improving, the C and D students would often just disappear. Under the new system, they stick around and keep trying.

There are other things I do to help keep affective issues from derailing students in my class, but right now I'd like to shift back to the reading classroom I described at the beginning and the fact that it is *four* levels below college English. This is where I normally begin a discussion of developmental education – making the case that we are dooming students with these long remedial pathways, and that we need to dramatically shorten our sequences. The more developmental levels that students are required to take,

the less likely those students are to ever complete college English, never mind achieve their larger educational goals of transferring or earning a degree.

The reason for this is not simply that students are under-skilled and under-motivated. And it's not just that poverty, family issues, and other outside forces pull them away from school (though it's true that these are powerful factors in community college students' lives). The part that's our responsibility – the part that's under our control – is our curriculum. When we place students into curricular structures where there are so many *opportunities* for attrition, we lose a lot of our students.

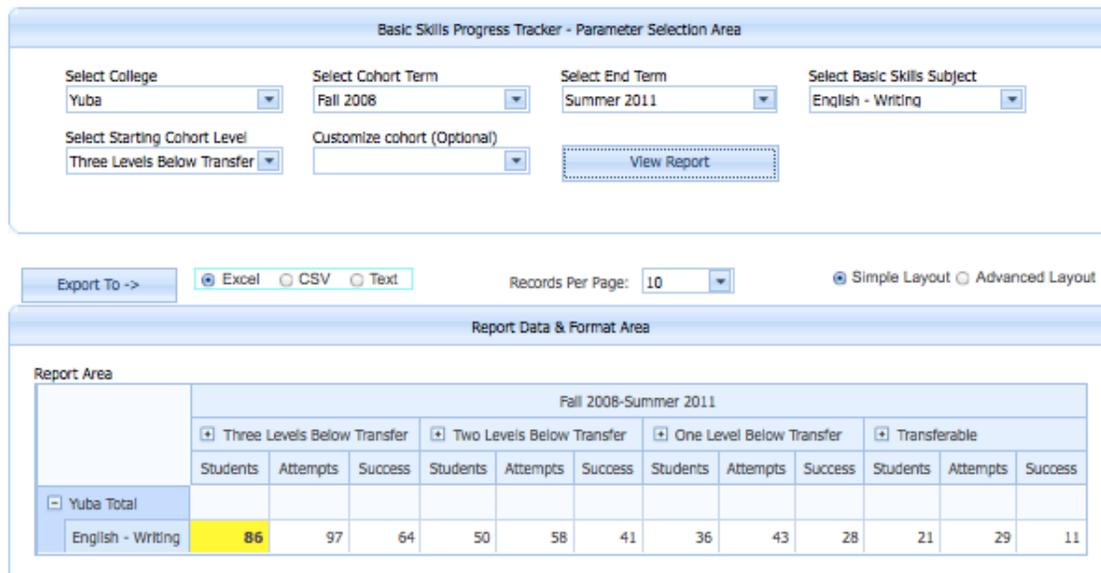
My math colleague Myra Snell and I have an exercise we do in presentations where we show that it is just about impossible to have a respectable number of students complete college-level courses when we require them to start two or more semesters below college.² I'd like to illustrate this point a different way here. A new online data tool is about to become available that enables all 112 California community colleges to see what happens to students as they move through our developmental sequences (Basic Skills Progress Tracker). I'm going to walk you through an example from Yuba College, which has historically placed incoming students in up to four levels of remediation below college English.

In Fall 2008, 86 students began their English coursework three levels below college English at Yuba. During the next three years, their pass rates inside each developmental course were solid – more than 75% of the students who enrolled in any given developmental level passed the course on a first or a repeated attempt. But because of cumulative attrition in the sequence, just 11 of those 86 students got all the way

through college English in three years – 13% of the original group. I’m sharing data from Yuba not to embarrass them – in fact, they were one of the first colleges to join the California Acceleration Project and work on redesigning their sequence. I’m sharing Yuba’s data because it is typical. If you think your college is different, and that students

Figure 5: Attrition of Students Starting Three Levels Below College English

who start three levels below college are doing much better than this, I encourage you to withhold your certainty until you’ve looked at your local cohort tracker data.



My focus today was on my own classroom practices, but this conversation is part of a larger argument that I’d like to make explicit in closing. In my work with the California Acceleration Project, I’m advocating for three main curricular changes.

- 1) We need to shorten our English course sequences. We need to let more students enroll directly in college composition, either in regular sections or sections with additional support provided through an attached co-requisite. And we need to

streamline stand-alone developmental curricula as much as possible. Aside from English-language classes for students just learning the language, I argue that English remediation should include no more than a single open-access integrated reading and writing course.

- 2) We need to make developmental classes more challenging. For me, this means giving students the same kinds of reading, thinking, and writing they'll see in the college-level course, but understanding that they won't be as good at them yet. Instead of grammar workbooks and process paragraphs about how to make tamales, students need to read about substantive issues, engage in higher order thinking on those issues, and write academic essays integrating what they've read.
- 3) This increased level of challenge must be combined with high levels of support, so that the fear and insecurity students bring to our classrooms don't keep them from being successful. We need to think of support not just in terms of add-ons like tutoring or having a counselor visit the class, but as the environment we create through grading practices, the language of our syllabus, the sequence of assignments, how we use class time, and how we give feedback.

The movement to accelerate developmental English and Math has picked up a lot of momentum in the last couple years. Many of your colleges are already trying some form of acceleration – compressing two levels of a sequence into one intensive course, creating open-access courses like the one at Chabot, mainstreaming students into college-level classes like in the Accelerated Learning Program at the Community College of Baltimore

County. If you're at a campus where this work has not yet taken hold, and students are still disappearing inside layers of remedial reading and writing courses, I encourage you to step forward and join the movement.

Students are much more capable than our traditional models of remediation have assumed. And we, as teachers, are capable of supporting them. It's time to change the way we approach incoming students. It's time to believe in student capacity and make our classrooms a place where that capacity is unleashed.

¹ A student who begins two levels below college English/math faces five exit points before completing the college-level course. They must 1) pass the first developmental course, 2) choose to enroll in the next developmental course, 3) pass that course, 4) choose to enroll in the college level, and 5) pass that course. Community colleges lose students at each exit point, which means that the pool of continuing students gets smaller and smaller throughout the sequence. Even if a college had spectacular pass rates in individual courses, attrition would still be high across these five exit points. To illustrate: If 90% of students passed each of the three courses, and 90% persisted between courses, just 59% of the students starting two levels below college would complete the college course. (.90 multiplied by itself five times).

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