

Action Research in the Community College:  
An Analytical Investigation of a Basic Skills Writing Course

By Josh M. Beach

Abstract

This essay will utilize an action research methodology to focus on a basic skills course in order to show (1) how one instructor structured an effective and educationally challenging course, (2) how students responded, (3) how the instructor evaluated student learning and the effectiveness of the course, and finally (4) how this instructor will adapt the course for the future. This essay also aspires to be a model (5) for how instructors can use action research as a form of institutional assessment.

Action Research in the Community College:  
An Analytical Investigation of a Basic Skills Writing Course

## INTRODUCTION: ACTION RESEARCH AS ASSESSMENT

There has been a recent policy shift in higher education, especially at the community college level, from affordable “open access” to evidence based outcomes, assessment, and “accountability” (League for Innovation, 2004). In many cases the policy rhetoric highlights the ideal end of equitable outcomes, especially in narrowing the gap between traditionally high achieving populations and traditionally underserved minority and lower-income populations. What often gets overlooked in policy discussions of institutional accountability and successful outcome measures is the role of both faculty and students in the assessment process, especially at the classroom level. What also gets lost is the interactive process of teaching and learning based on the interdependent relationship between the teacher and student. The interactive and interdependent relationships established in classrooms can create the conditions for transformative, “co-constructive” learning experiences for both students *and teachers* (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2007). The outcomes of the learning process are co-constructed through a mutually accountable relationship between the teacher and the student, and between these classroom participants and the larger institution. To better understand how to evaluate institutions, researchers would be well served to better understand how teachers evaluate student learning, the educational process, and themselves.

There has been a newly legitimated, practice-based research methodology in the field of education called by various names: “action research,” “practitioner research,” “teacher research,”

and “practice-based research” (Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007, p. 406, footnote 1). This type of research has been neutrally defined as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process, for the purpose of gathering data about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how students learn” (p. 401). Many educators see action research as a “relevant” and “practical” form of research-based knowledge that has direct applications for an individual teacher’s classroom and institutional context.

Action research was developed by Kurt Lewin and John Collier in the 1940s as a method to promote research-informed social change based on the principles of democracy and equitable human relationships (Bargal 2006; Neilsen, 2006). Some scholars link the work of Paulo Freire to the tradition of action research, and certainly his theory and methods were conceptually related (Freire, 1970; Freire 1982; Freire 1998; Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 15-16)<sup>1</sup>. Growing out of the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) which was founded in 1976,<sup>2</sup> the journal *Educational Action Research* was first published in 1992, and a second peer-reviewed journal, *Action Research*, was established 2003. Currently there is much scholarly interest in action research (Dick, 2006) and there is a growing industry of textbooks published on the subject (Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007, p. 406, footnote 2). Up until the late 1990s; however, there was little scholarly attention paid to action research in the field of education. When scholars did begin to investigate this mode of research it was often prized for its methodological novelty. Educational studies of action research have often focused on the method as a new form of assessment, which often divorces the theory from its social-democratic roots and transformative framework (Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007).

Some community college practitioners and institutions have tried to implement more focused and sustained “critical reflection” on their own understanding, implementation, and evaluation of teaching and learning (Rouseff-Baker & Holm, p. 29). Some of this work can be seen as forms of action research, although community college practitioners are not always aware of this term, its methodological principles, or its history.

Parkland College in Champaign, IL has a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which has six faculty development and training components: New Full-Time Faculty Orientation course, a Mentoring Program, Classroom Assessment and Research courses, Learning Issues Seminars, Teaching and Learning Workshops, and Discussion groups.<sup>3</sup> One of these components, the Classroom Assessment and Research courses,<sup>4</sup> teach faculty how to use Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) in order to investigate the effectiveness of teaching by getting structured feedback from students. The basic framework for Parkland College’s CATs comes from the second edition of Angelo and Cross’ *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (1993, part 2), which offers many techniques that can be used to assess student knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and student reactions to teaching and assignments.

Angelo and Cross’ *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (1993; Rouseff-Baker & Holm, p. 30-31) provides a basic framework that can be analytically broken down into a cycle:

- (1) Plan the course: curriculum & teaching strategies
- (2) Teach the course
- (3) Assess the course
- (4) Analyze the assessment data
- (5) Respond to the analysis
- (6) Adapt the course
- (7) Re-plan the course & follow the cycle again

This “feedback loop” allows a teacher to critically reflect on their own teaching, monitor their students’ reactions to various curricula or assignments, and revise teaching and learning strategies based upon the process (Rouseff-Baker & Holm, p. 30-31).

This essay will present one community college instructor’s journey into action research. Action research has been used by the author over the last few years as a tool to construct basic skills and college level writing classes, to evaluate the learning of the students, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher and the curriculum. This essay will focus on only one course, an entry level basic skills course,<sup>5</sup> over one semester in order to show (1) how one instructor has tried to structure a meaningful and educationally challenging course, (2) how students have responded to this course, (3) how the instructor evaluated student learning and the effectiveness of the course, and finally (4) how this instructor will structure this same course differently in the future. This essay also aspires to be a model (5) for how other instructors could similarly use action research as a form of assessment, which can be used to evaluate both student success outcomes and teaching and learning strategies.

#### STEP 1: CURRICULUM DESIGN

I get the distinct impression through casual conversations with some of my colleagues and through analysis of formal departmental documents that many community college instructors do not invest much time or effort in curriculum design. I have no way to verify or quantify this statement, but it makes a certain amount of intuitive sense given that most community college instructors have no formal training in curriculum or instruction.<sup>6</sup> Many community college instructors seem to just choose a textbook (or have a textbook chosen for them) and then structure their course straight from the structure of the book. This can have its advantages: it

saves time for the instructor; provides a somewhat of a coherent structure and voice for the students to follow (depending on the quality of the book); and it could potentially save students some money if a single book were used, although many of the best comprehensive textbooks cost between \$60-\$100. The disadvantages, however, are many: the instructor is completely reliant on the structure of the book and the judgments of its author; the instructor has no ownership over the curriculum and content of the class – the instructor is merely a facilitator of the book; over-reliance on a single textbook can instill a passive deference to the authority of the text for both the teacher and the student; and the instructor can easily fall into an unimaginative “teach-to-the-text” skill-and-drill method, which has proven to be ineffective for basic skills students.

For those instructors who do take an active role in designing their course curriculum, they might think that the first place to start would be obtaining the official “course outline” provided by the department. Most departments that I have worked for make it seem as if this should always be the first step in curricular design, and many departments have explicitly made it clear that no deviance from the official course outline is allowed. In fact, many departments demand that instructors copy verbatim the course description, student learning outcomes, and course topics – and sometimes demand that instructors only use pre-approved textbooks listed on the official document. There are practical organizational and administrative reasons for these demands (like creating a framework for departmental coherence or helping to facilitate articulation agreements); however, there are also disadvantages: limiting instructor professionalism through the authoritarian structure; stifling instructor creativity; encouraging authoritarianism in senior full-time faculty; and potentially reifying established course parameters, which can promote departmental passivity and become a barrier to institutional or

classroom innovation. Thus, no instructor should begin to develop a course by looking at the approved department “course outline.”<sup>7</sup>

The first step (1.A) of curricular design is for the instructor to *conceptualize, organize, and verbalize a theory or philosophy of education*, including their principles of teaching and learning. Most community college instructors do not start with this step because very few are actually trained in the methods and theory of curriculum, instruction, and student learning. So perhaps the first step of curricular design (and better teaching in general) would actually be to teach community college instructors about these subjects and, thereby, empower them to become more competent professionals, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

In order to describe my own theory of education I will need to borrow a couple of paragraphs from an essay I wrote called “The Ecology of Education.” Education is a formalized social process, whereby, the traditions, activities, relationships, knowledge, and values of a society are communicated and conveyed to students in experientially relevant ways through a conducive milieu. Education is the situated meeting of a student, peers, teacher, curriculum, and a structured milieu whereby learning is enacted and co-produced by all participants. In understanding education as part of the larger process of socialization, students both experience and transform inherited social practices in a process of co-constructing the society of which they are a part (Dewey, 1916/1966; Dewey, 1938/1997; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Learning is an experience mediated by engaging in a social practice, and as such learning cannot be “designed:” “Learning happens, design or no design...it can only be designed *for* – that is, facilitated or frustrated” (Wenger, 1998, p. 225, 229). If one wants to consciously and deliberately initiate learning, one must “design social infrastructures that foster learning” (p. 225).<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the effects of teaching on student learning and achievement are important (Good & Grouws, 1977; Grubb, 1999; Wentzel, 2002), but this is only one part of the ecology of education. Bronfenbrenner's model for the ecology of human development (1979) can also be applied to the ecology of education (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006, p. 537). Larger social structures outside the classroom as well as social factors inside the classroom will affect a student's learning and achievement. Research on the larger context of schooling, especially at the primary level in relation to human development, has demonstrated the importance of socioeconomic status (McLoyd, 1998), ethnicity and culture (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992), gender (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997; Pomerantz, Rydell, & Saxon, 2002), the social environments of schools (Eccles et. al., 1993; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997), the social and curricular structure of the classroom (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998), the social networking of peer groups (Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Hudley & Graham, 1993), and vocational education and adolescent development (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Ryan and Stiller (1991) have argued that the subtler social contexts and "affective lessons" of schooling often get neglected by researchers and policy makers in their rush to focus on one aspect of the educational ecology – often student achievement. Ryan and Stiller argue that educational experiences and the learning of students cannot be controlled from without by standards or precepts. Learning is subtly "emanated from within" the social-psychology of the student. Education is internalized by students who experience and engage with an educational ecology, and researchers studying the process of education must be mindful of the less visible psychological and social processes affecting more visible markers like student achievement.

Once instructors understand the complex ecology of education and is able to articulate their own philosophy of education, the next step (1.B) in curricular design is for instructors to

*conceptualize, organize, and verbalize a coherent theoretical and thematic structure for the course – the content and theory of the course.* While this may be intuitive for many disciplines, I would argue this specific issue is very problematic, and thus ignored, by instructors in technique-oriented disciplines like composition, math, and vocational subjects.<sup>9</sup> I utilize a couple of different thematic and/or theoretical structures for different courses in the writing sequence. For instance, in my lowest level basic skills class (three levels removed from college level writing) I have structured the course around the themes of “knowing your self,” “knowing your world,” and “learning how to express your knowledge,” while relying on basic skills theory. This creates a coherent framework for structuring textbook readings, assignments, tests, group work, and classroom discussion. In another basic skills class (pre-college level writing) I use the themes of American democracy and equality and the theory of “learning academic literacy,” “joining academic conversations,” and “refining the craft of writing.”<sup>10</sup> This framework also allows an instructor to coherently select readings for the course that will not only revolve around core themes and theory, but which should also relate to each other and provoke critical comparisons. Too often textbooks present a menagerie of unrelated texts and writing methods that unduly confuse and challenge the budding intellects of developmental students. In order to mediate this problem, instructors need to organize their own readings on a clear framework that will help facilitate not only a student’s reading of any particular text, but also help structure complex (and perhaps contested) knowledge about a subject.

Once an instructor has a clear philosophy of education and a coherent course structure, then the next step (1.C) is to review not only departmental “course outlines,” but also state department of education course outlines for high school classes<sup>11</sup> (they may come before or concurrent with the course you are teaching), and course outlines for 4-year university classes

(which most likely will come after the course you are teaching). It is important for the instructor to *have a coherent and holistic understanding of the secondary through post-secondary writing sequence* before any specific course is planned. In fact, it would be advisable for every instructor to structure an entire sequence of writing courses that might be taught at the current institution so as to understand, structure, and reinforce all of the requisite skills for every class within the sequence. It would also be important to give a general sense of how institutions and disciplines of higher education are structured, and how your discipline fits within that structure. Students, especially developmental students and first generation students, need to be taught the big picture about how higher education works and how this particular class and these particular skills fit within that bigger picture.<sup>12</sup>

The next step in the process (1.D) is to *select textbooks and readings*. Textbook selection can be a daunting task for the instructor, especially in the field of composition, because there are hundreds of textbooks to choose from. Selected lists that departments usually assemble and attach to course outlines can help manage the deluge, but there are still many texts to choose from and they all seem so similar. For the time strapped adjunct or the overwhelmed full-timer, it is easiest to just randomly select a text (or have someone recommend or assign a text) and then stick with the text for years. But choosing the right textbook is very important and time should be set aside every year to analyze new texts for possible course adoption. Browsing through a departmental library or the collections often held in writing and learning centers is a great way to get a close up look, and most textbook publishers are happy to send you copies of new texts to review every year.

There is no golden rule for selecting a textbook and many composition texts are very similar in a lot of ways; however, there are at least four important issues that an instructor should

consider before selecting a text. The first (a) is *compatibility*: Does the text fit with both your philosophy of education? Does it fit with your course structure? Does it fit with the student learning outcomes for the course that you are teaching? The next issue (b) is *comprehensiveness*: Does the text include all of the topics and issues you will cover over the semester? Depending on how comprehensive your course is, finding one textbook to cover everything can be a challenge, especially when it comes to course readings, of which more will be said in a moment. Another issue (c) is *coherence*: is the textbook coherent, clear, and easy for your students to read? Does it explain issues well, and does it connect different aspects of the writing process together into a coherent process? The final issue (d) is *cost*: Is the textbook affordable for your students, especially if you will require more than one text for the course? This last issue is very important and the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance has compiled many reports on both the affordability college (ACSFA, 2001; ACSFA, 2002) and the affordability of textbooks (ACSFA, 2006; ACSFA, 2007). Over the last 20 years textbooks have risen in cost over 186% (far beyond the general rate of inflation) and students at California public universities spent about \$898 on textbooks for the 2004-05 school year (ACSFA, 2006). When at all possible, textbooks should be chosen because they are affordable for the students, and instructors should put at least 1-2 copies of each text in the library on reserve for those students who cannot afford to buy the texts.

Sometimes an instructor will find a textbook with appropriate course readings that fit the structure and themes of the course, but often this is not the case, especially when an instructor covers themes that are not often covered in textbooks, for instance violence against homosexuals, racism in higher education, or global slavery. It is very important to structure basic skills composition classes around academic literacy, which involves learning how to read (ideally

college level texts) and learning how to respond in an academic way (Center for Student Success, 2007; Graff & Birkenstein, 2006). Course readings should be selected for many reasons, but here are a few of the most important considerations. First, readings should be selected for (a) their *content*. It is important to select content that will interest, engage, challenge, and enlighten readers. It is also important to have a broad, multimedia understanding of “texts” and popular films and documentaries should be used in writing classrooms to help engage students and spark writing based responses (I will discuss this issue at more length below). Next, readings should be selected for (b) their *quality as good models of diverse writing purposes and styles*. It is important to find texts that are written well, that model formal academic writing as much as possible, and that are clearly structured. Course readings should also be selected for (c) *length and difficulty*, especially for developmental writing courses. And finally, readings should be selected on the basis of (d) *affordability* for the students and (e) *convenience* for the instructor, which are not necessarily compatible goods. I photocopy a few short 1-2 page texts in my developmental writing classes and these are fairly convenient for me and they are free for the students.

At the same time that course readings are being selected, an instructor should also be planning (1.E) *course assignments, handouts, methods of student evaluation, and the syllabus*. All of these are pieces of the larger course structure that an instructor designs and, along with the selected texts and readings, all of these pieces formally come together at once in the creation of the syllabus. So, in the interest of time, I will discuss all of these parts as I walk through the construction of my syllabus, which for this paper is focused on the first class in a basic skills writing sequence (three steps removed from college level writing).

A syllabus is always in flux: I not only revise my syllabus each semester after evaluating its previous effectiveness, but I also tell my students on the first day of class that I reserve the right to revise the syllabus (in terms of the assignment calendar) during the semester. I strive to be very responsive to my students, and basic skills students are always present unique challenges, and every semester there is some assignment or subject that students need more time to complete, and I will adjust the assignment calendar when needed to allow for students to have more time to complete an assignment. But during the semester the basic structure of the class (textbooks, class policies, assignments, and grading) is constant, and so for my first sequence basic skills class I include not only a general assignment calendar (that can be easily modified when a need arises), but also a course assignment checklist, which allows for stability by providing students a structured list of all the assignments that will be completed that semester.

A sample syllabus is included in Appendix 1, and this provides the basic framework for the class, which I will not spend too much time discussing. Much of the language on the first page is required by the department and the class policies will be fairly self-evident for the readers. I would like to spend some time discussing a unique feature of my syllabus, the “course contract,” the nature of some of the handouts I provide my students, but most of this section will focus on the course assignments and student evaluation structure.

A syllabus is generally acknowledged as a type of “contract” between a student and an instructor, but this function is not often explicitly stated. After my first year of teaching community college students it became obvious to me that many of my students did not have a clue about their responsibilities as students nor what my role was as their teacher. As part of my own philosophy of education, I developed an explicit statement in the form of a “contract,” which I included on all my syllabi, and which I make my students sign the first week of class,

thus, signifying their agreement to participate in the course. I use the verbiage of this passage to give my students a short, motivational lecture on the meaning of education, their responsibilities as students, and my responsibilities as their teacher. I put into words the relationship that is forming and make it clear that we both have responsibilities to each other and to the learning process, and I tell my students that if they are not engaging in the class then I will ask them to leave because they are violating the contract they signed. I cannot quantify the effectiveness of this contract, I do know that it does help me not only lay the ground rules of our educational endeavor, but it also serves as a touchstone to remind my students what they signed up for at the start of the semester.

I have created many handouts over the years trying to condense the most important concepts or process of the class down into an easy to read charts, but I also use handouts to engage students and to give them additional information. I think it is important for instructors to take ownership of the basic concepts of the class and how they teach these concepts, but I want to focus here on the extracurricular uses of handouts. There is one handout that I used to append to the syllabus, but now I give it out separately, and this handout consisted of a “priorities” exercise and a weekly schedule. Depending on the time I have, this handout could be used to structure a how class through an activity or it could be briefly explained and assigned as homework. Basically I use the handout to discuss the limited and constrained nature of human beings in their struggle to survive and the need we all have to create “priorities” in our life in order to not only be aware of the goods we seek, but also prioritize those goods for times when our resources, especially time, run thin and we must choose one good over another. I link this discussion to schooling and higher education and the sacrifice of time, money, relationships, and time that seeking a degree will demand.

I also link this discussion to another handout, which consists of photocopied pages from a district handbook. This handout includes a chart on the ranks of higher educational credentials (supplemented by my own knowledge of the social and economic value of these credentials), a “student educational plan” that counseling departments use, a “transfer checklist,” the flow chart for the English composition sequence of classes the students will have to take, and a chart on “how college is different from high school.” I use this handout to discuss and introduce my students to the basic structure of higher education, the skills and behaviors needed to succeed, and some of the specific paths to earn a credential – and of course I tell my students that I would be willing to go over this information in more detail if they have any questions, and I also direct them to the counseling center to meet with a counselor and fill out a “student educational plan.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the syllabus contains the assignment structure of the course and the methods for assessing student learning. Figuring out the right assignment and evaluation formula for this entry level basic skills has been very difficult. This has been the third time that I have taught this class in four years, and I think I have finally found a formula that satisfies me as an instructor and which seems to promote a high level of success in my students. The three basic components of the class, as designated by the district, are grammar/sentence structure (highest priority), sentence & paragraph writing (next highest priority), and responding to reading (lowest priority). From previous experiences and review of the basic skills literature, I know several characteristics of my students: they do not like to come to class consistently, they rarely study, most have difficulty doing all the assigned work, most have weak reading skills, almost all of the students seem to retain very little knowledge and have trouble doing well on tests, and most are easily distracted in the classroom. So from this I concluded that (a) I had to structure enough time in class to allow them to finish their weekly work so as to cut down on

homework, (b) I had to explain lessons in basic terms, repeat lessons over and over, and allow my students time each week to practice, (c) I had to limit “high stakes” testing and allow students to be assessed, but not to overly penalize early failure, (d) I had to structure writing assignments so that students could write first drafts in class, be able to discuss writing assignments with me, and have plenty of time to edit their work, (e) I needed to structure some type of individual meeting with each student to monitor their progress and give them individual feedback, and (f) I needed to find ways to keep them on task and entertained during class.

So with all this in mind I structured the class accordingly. First of all, I created a basic structure for the first ten weeks so students who clearly know what to expect each day: I would briefly introduce and explain a grammar/sentence structure lesson on Monday, we would practice a couple of homework exercises as a class, and then the class would individually work on their homework exercises as I circled the room and answered questions. On Wed we would have a “quiz” on the week’s lesson, and the majority of these quizzes were group quizzes and open book so that students were basically on task and practicing, and many of these quizzes were turned into “game show” quizzes where I would give direct feedback and explanation for each question. Near week five I introduced and explained the basic structure of the paragraph and I gave them time in class each Wed to write the first draft of a series of paragraphs on their personal life. All this weekly work was graded with each assignment given a particular amount of points. If they did the assignment completely then they received full credit, with the exception of quizzes, which were graded according to correct answers. Overall, I had created a system where a student who did all the weekly book and writing work would be able to earn around a high C or low B grade even if they failed all the quizzes, thus, there would be no reason to drop

out of the course for performance reasons up until mid-term. This weekly bookwork, assignments, and quizzes were worth 50% of the final grade.

The remaining 50% of the final grade would consist of a large portfolio of 11 paragraphs (25%) and a series of “final” exams, two group tests and one individual test (averaging for 25%). I clearly established a framework for a “good” paragraph, and I gave each student an “editing sheet” (Appendix 2) that clearly listed all the criteria for A level writing. I asked students to photocopy the sheet so that they could use it to edit their paragraphs or to take to the writing center when meeting with a tutor. I also made it a point to meet with each student individually around mid-term and to fill out a student evaluation sheet to assess not only the students “grades,” but also their student skills, their educational goals, and personal matters in an attempt to develop a relationship with my students so that I could better counsel them to success (See Appendix 3). At this meeting I gave students their mid-term grade and discussed what students would need to do in order to successfully pass the class. I also used this time to tell the “failing” students that they could still pass the class if they improved their performance (which usually meant not missing so many classes, turning in all work, and studying more), and I gave some of these students an opportunity to do and turn in past missed assignments.

Thus, the structure of the class put an emphasis on coming to class, doing assignments, participating in class, and practicing what they were learning. There were many “tests” of student performance, but they were offset by a more participatory centered grading system. I also used class time, after class, email, and the mid-term evaluations to establish relationships with my students to help motivate and encourage them. The plan of the course in terms of student evaluation were: (1) allow students structured time to practice and develop student skills, (2) give students enough time to write and edit their portfolio of paragraphs over the whole

semester with feedback from both the instructor and the writing center, and (3) a series of “final” exams to assess knowledge of grammar and sentence structure, but strategically weighted to be only 25% of the final grade.

Finally, after designing and structuring the curriculum, the instructor also needs to plan (1.F) *teaching strategies* for particular types of assignments or classroom activities and (1.G) *methods for evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum and teaching*. For my own course I utilized several different types of teaching strategies: brief lectures, whole group discussion, individual work with instructor facilitation, structured group work, a couple of multimedia films chosen for particular content, individualized one-on-one instruction (before class, after class, and via email) individualized one-on-one relationship building, and I also use my web page to distribute links, post the syllabus, and post handouts, although I use this medium much less for my basic skills courses. To evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and my teaching I created an end of the semester survey for students to fill out (See Appendix 4). The contents of the survey will be discussed in the analyzing the data section.

## STEPS 2 & 3: TEACH & ASSESS THE COURSE

Much could be said about these two steps, but in the interest of time I will not spend much time on these two important parts because I have not been able to develop a full sense of my own teaching abilities as an isolated action researcher. It is perhaps impossible for an action researcher to describe their own actual teaching on any given day in a particular classroom. This is where action research needs to be collaborative. Grubb (1999) is very clear that effective teaching and the development of innovative teaching strategies takes collaborative effort. To truly get a sense of how you teach, someone else must watch, monitor, and evaluate your

teaching, and then communicate their critical evaluations in sustained dialog. Ideally, this would happen when departments formally “evaluate” instructors in community colleges, but from my experience, engaged and comprehensive feedback or dialog on actual teaching is a rarity – I’ve never actually seen this happen. The best an action research can do alone is to monitor their own actions on a given day and critically reflect upon practice after a class (and perhaps write these reflections down in a journal), and to structure some type evaluation of the teacher on the end of the semester course evaluation (more will be said about this in a moment).

I would like to say, ala Paulo Freire (1998), that teaching and education is about possibility and the nurturing of possibility. Education is a “total experience” and teaching always produces some type of learning, although not necessarily the type of learning that a teacher hopes to produce (p. 31). Teachers are catalysts. They strive to “enlighten” – to turn on, to activate – their students in some way, but sometimes that reaction is negative. On some days a student will gain the ability to develop potential and learn in structured “practice” activities, and on other days the student might learn that the teacher is a flawed, boring, blowhard that likes to talk about things of no interest. I fundamentally believe that teachers who try to educate students are engaging in the process of developing human beings and human potential, and how do you really measure or assess this type of process (Freire, 1998, p. 39; see also Buckman, 2007)? I don’t know if it is fundamentally possible, or if it is, not in the conventional ways administrators or educators assess teaching and learning.

Finally, there are steps that an action research can take to assess the teaching and learning that takes place both in and out of the classroom. The obvious method of course is the process of structuring some type of “tests” and then grading the performance of the student, which I have already discussed. Another method is dialog. As an instructor of a basic skills course I both

structure times for personal dialog with each student, and I informally try to spark dialog with students about assignments, activities, the class, and their education in general. One of the most profound ways for human beings to engage with each other and structure education is through sustained dialog and the relationships that are formed through this type of process. To the extent that an instructor can gain the confidence in a student, strike up conversations, and develop a relationship with that student then I think the instructor has a significant measure of educational effectiveness. But how would you actually quantify the development of a student-teacher relationship for the purposes of institutional effectiveness? Is this a measure that most administrators or educational policy makers would even respect? A more quantifiable measure of educational effectiveness would be some type of survey or structured feedback response. I included a sample of a survey that I developed and use at the end of my courses. A survey quantifies particular types of behaviors that give an indication that learning or student development have taken place, but this type of data is very limited. That is why I also have my students write a short paragraph about the course, the teacher, and what they learned. This is a way to structure a limited, but more substantive type of dialog that can give an instructor insight about the class, the student, and the learning that took place over the semester.

#### STEPS 4 & 5: ANALYZE THE DATA & RESPOND

The data I collected this semester were generated by a survey distributed to students on the last day of class during finals week combined with my grade sheet and attendance sheet. I have my students put their name on the surveys, instead of keeping them anonymous, because I want to link some of the information on the survey to particular student's performance in the course. Scholars have noted many ethical concerns in action research (Nolen & Vander Putten,

2007), including the affects action researchers have on student generated data, but I would argue that the whole premise of action research is based on the emersion of the researcher into tangled webs of relationship with and responsibilities to the main subject of study: the students. The whole point of action research is for a teacher to reflect upon both the methods of curriculum and teaching, and the affects of the curriculum and teaching on student success markers. Thus, the positivist space between researcher and research is purposefully collapsed into a relational and deeply personal understanding of “affectation” in a non-pejorative sense: how do I as a teacher affect my students and their individual performance.

I started the semester a bit overloaded with 36 students. The course cap is set at 30 students, but knowing that many students end up dropping and knowing that my institution needs to generate money based on student enrollment, I usually do not turn away extra students at the start of the semester. The semester lasts 16 weeks and generally by week 9 or 10 I loose up to half of my students in most of my classes (basic skills writing through sophomore level critical thinking and writing). Students simply stop attending for many reasons (new job, health, family responsibilities, not turning in assignments, and other reasons), but many do not bother to officially drop the course, which when combined with the erratic nature of many students attendance, sometimes makes it difficult to know if a student is still in your class or not. I stress to my students the importance of communicating with me when emergencies come up that provoke absences, but many students never bother to tell me why they miss a class or stop coming to class. I was very surprised and gladdened this semester because by week 9 I had only lost six students (2 of whom never attended in the first place, 1 stopped coming the first week, and 1 left to attend to his sick son), which means I retained more than 83% of my students (30 out of 36) through week 9 (although 1 student who stopped coming didn't drop the course until

after the official census date). Of the 30 students who were still somewhat actively enrolled in my class, only 50% of those students (15) were actually passing the course with grades of C- or higher (3% A, 27% B, and 20% C), and 50% (15) were failing with grades of D+ or lower (20% D and 30% F); however, 6 of the failing students with F grades had stopped attending the class regularly by that point (at least one of which had kept in communication with me because he had been promoted and had to work more hours, which detracted from school).

It was after week 9 that it became apparent that I had lost more students: some withdrew from the class, but many did not. I lost four students who were failing after the midterm evaluation conferences even though I told them there was still a good chance for them to pass the class; however, these four students never actually dropped the course. By the end of the semester I was down to 20 regularly attending students (28 officially still registered), but I use that words “regularly attending” loosely because 7 of those students (35% of those still attending on some semblance of a regular basis) had missed at least 17% of the semester’s classes, and of those 7 students, 4 students had missed 30-35% (1 because of National Guard duty, 1 for health reasons, and the other two because of family responsibilities). Of those 20 “regularly attending” students who made it to the end of the semester, 18 passed (90%) the class with a C- or better (16 of these students earned C- to C+). If we factor in the 31 students enrolled at the census date when the official count is taken and the 28 students still officially registered by the end of the course, then we have a 90% retention rate, although only 71.4% of the officially registered students were actively participating in the course by the end of the semester. If we divide the 18 students who passed the course by the 28 students still officially registered in the course, then we have a 64% pass rate, although it jumps to 90% if only the 20 actively attending students are factored in.

I wanted to compare my class to averages for this type of class on my campus, but because the campus where I taught this course is a newer branch campus of a larger community college district, there is no data available for this campus. But there is data available for the main campus, which is a much larger, more established, and better resourced community college so the comparison will be skewed. I accessed some data from The Management Information Services (MIS) unit of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office called the Chancellor's Office Data Mar, which collects data from the 72 districts, 109 campuses, 64 approved educational centers, and 20 separately reported district offices of the California Community College system (CCCCO, 2007). This particular data base does not separate out individual basic skills English classes, but instead gives an average percentage rate for all basic skills English classes on a particular campus. This will also skew the comparison because it is widely known that retention and success rates tend to be lower for entry level basic skills writing classes. The average retention rate for all basic skills writing classes on the main campus of the district from Fall 2006 to Spring 2007 was about 85%, and the average pass rate was 58.5%.

My particular class is above the retention average (90% compared to 85%) and a bit above the pass average (64% compared to 58.5%), although one would expect that an entry level basic skills class would be lower than average for both rates. However, if I use the data collected from my class, only 20 students actually kept actively coming to class at the end of the semester, which lowers the actual retention rate to 71.4%, but it drastically raises the pass rate to 90%. These two different calculations present widely divergent measures of success, but I think it is clear that the second measure seems more valid because system-wide measures of persistence do not really capture "actively participating" students who stay with a class until the end of the semester. Thus, action researchers, who are trained to not only evaluate their own curriculum

and teaching methods, but also the success rates of their students, could have a dramatic impact on measures for institution success. Not only would these measures be more accurate, but they would also potentially raise the institutional effectiveness rates because of that accuracy.

The above analysis was all calculated with only my grade sheet and reference to the Chancellor's Office Data Mart. I also want to say a few words about the other data I collected on the end of the semester survey. There are three main categories of data captured in this survey: (1) student characteristics pertaining to non-academic factors, (2) student characteristics pertaining to academic factors, and (3) student evaluations of the class and the teacher. 17 out of the 20 actively attending students at the end of the semester ( $n = 17$ ) participated in this survey, and I will refer to this group as my "core class" because they represent the actual number of persisting students.

My core class was made up of 82% non-white students, 65% female, 88% under 22 years old, 71% in their first semester in higher education, and 18% in their second semester. The class averages 4.5 hours a week spending time with their family, 5.6 hours with friends, 3.4 hours watching television or movies, 71% of the class works 21 hours a week or more, and 30% of the class works 31 hours a week or more. The average student was taking 3 classes this semester (only 14/17 responded to this question), would spend about 3 hours a week on homework for all classes, and would spend about 3.8 hours a week in the writing center (there could be overlap between the homework and writing center hours because many students do their homework in the writing center). I also had a 5 point scale to rate answers to some academically oriented and course-evaluative questions from "very true" to "not true." I averaged these answers numerically and coded them with a letter grade (very true = 1 = A grade; not true = 5 = F). Below are a list of questions with the numerical average and coded grade:

Question	Numerical Average	Grade
“I go to class everyday”	2.18	C+
“I work hard on homework”	2.23	C+
“I participate and I’m an active learner in class”	2.35	C+
“I enjoy coming to class”	1.76	B/B+
“I think my writing skills are improving”	2.00	B
“I learned a lot from my teacher”	1.59	B+
“My teacher is a good teacher”	1.47	A-
“I would take this teacher again”	1.47	A-

The data indicate that students spend much more time per week on working, friends, family, and television than they do on studying for class. If we factor in both class time and homework then the class averaged about 16.5 hours a week on academic matters, about 13.5 hours on personal matters, and about 71% of the class spent at least 21 hours a week working. If one were to hypothesize a 14 hour waking day (roughly 10 hours of sleep) x 7 days a week that would amount to 98 hours a week for human activity of which 17% is spent on academic matters, 14% on person matters, and about 21% on work, which leaves over 50% of these student’s time unaccounted for. This is all of course hypothetical, but it does give us an estimate about how much time per week is actually spent on academic matters (17%), which for a class averaging about full-time status (three four credit classes) is extremely low and may account for part of the reason why basic skills students do so poorly in school: many simply do not put much time or effort into the process. This conclusion is also supported by the data where student’s rated their own academic performance, which averaged around C+, in relation to their perception of my teaching ability, which averaged around B+/A-. Thus, as all teachers already know, a good instructor’s effectiveness is limited to a certain extent by their student’s academic effort;

however, the defining mark of a good teacher is, perhaps, his or her ability to mediate a student's academic effort through motivational strategies and caring persistence.

#### STEPS 6 & 7: ADAPT & REPLAN THE COURSE

After completing this course, reflecting on the teaching and learning that transpired, and after completing project I have some concrete ideas about how to adapt the course for the next time that I will teach it. I will try to do an earlier mid-term evaluation of my students near week 6 in order to establish more personal relationships sooner, but I will not give out any grades so as to not discourage any students. I also want to do more informal in-class and out of class writing to give my students more practice and confidence in writing. I think maybe a writing journal would be useful in this regard. I would also like to include more multimedia prompts for writing like songs, clips from t.v. shows or movies, or web sties. I think these would make the class more interesting for both the students and I, and it might get them more enthusiastic about writing.

After conducting this research, I am surprisingly pleased with the performance of my students, and my performance as their teacher, once I adjusted the persistence and success rates for the actual "core" group that actively stayed with the class until the end of the semester. I had never bothered to actually differentiate the data before and I had always just estimated the persistence and pass rates by the original number of students, which was always disheartening. I think the process of my research and the data I generated would not only help create more effective and engaged instructors, but it also would help institutions better estimate their overall effectiveness. However, the downside of this particular project, and action research in general for community college practitioners, was that it took me around 40-50 hours over several weeks

to complete, and unlike many community college instructors, I have been extensively trained in the methods and theory of curriculum and instruction. Without institutional support and incentive for action research, what full-time faculty member (let alone a part-time adjunct, even though I am a part-timer) could contemplate such a time commitment each semester? It might be more feasible and economical for institutions to support an action research workshop over the summer months to prepare instructors to collect data over the school year, and then offer small stipends to analyze data and complete a report over the next summer following a year's worth of research. Action research should be an important long-term investment for all community colleges that are concerned about teaching effectiveness and institutional effectiveness, and all things considered, this type of innovation would be relatively easy to structure into existing practices, although there would be some financial cost.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the complexity of the ecology of education has consequences not only for teaching, research, and assessment, but also for the transferability of particular promising practices from one semester to the next, from one course to another, from one instructor to another, or between institutions. I think action research presents an important way to restructure assessment frameworks away from mechanical structures of linear input/output process whereby education is reduced to delivering a product of "learning" that can be discretely broken down into isolated parts and easily measured (see League for Innovation, 2004). Buckman (2007) notes that assessment is a natural part of the process of education, but current policy demanding increased assessment are often "a genuine perversion of the educational process" because they are directed by outside forces, usually politicians and business constituents, who have no

knowledge of curriculum or pedagogy, and therefore, are not the real “experts” in education who should be dictating “assessment” strategies (p. 30, 33). Action research presents an avenue that both meets demands for increased assessment and accountability measures while at the same time relying upon and developing the professional research and teaching capacities of higher education instructors. Action research combines teaching, research, assessment, and accountability into a multifaceted conception of education that respects students, teachers, and the institutional context of the embedded act of education.

Action research also provides fertile ground for more readily developing and disseminating promising practices across classrooms within an institution and also between institutions. Badway and Laanan (2007) have discussed the concept of “divisibility” as an alternative paradigm to “dissemination” for transferring promising practices. Dissemination is simply packing a *product* and transporting it to new environments; divisibility, however, focuses on a *process*, and conceptualizes a network of parts. Divisibility also encourages “reinvention” strategies instead of a simple adoption in full model. Badway and Laanan stressed that there are really no “best practices,” only “promising practices” that are situated in specific and complex contexts. I have broken down my own action research into a clear process composed of several parts, and I would encourage any future action researchers to adapt and transform this process in order to make it their own.

In order to successfully “transfer” a promising practice, action researchers much develop a nuanced understanding of the complexity and situatedness of the practice at hand – whether that be teaching or conducting action research – in order to think about how the practice in whole or in part might be effectively transferred to the next semester, to another class, to another colleague, or to another institution. Researchers also must be aware of and try to predict how

certain promising practices might substantially change given the constraints and possibilities of new educational ecologies, like a new set of students, a different course, another instructor's class, or another institution. Promising practices must be *transplanted*, not just transported, and that entails situating transplanted promising practices in promising host sites that will approximate a compatible educational ecology. And even then, a promising host site is not enough to guarantee student learning or student achievement. As Constance Weaver (1996/2007) noted in relation to the teaching of composition, an educational environment demands "ongoing experimentation" from an actively engaged teacher: "Adaptations will usually be necessary as well as desirable" because "we must all to some extent reinvent the wheel of effective instruction in our own classrooms, even while we share our efforts with each other, collaborate with one another, and benefit from others' experiences" (154-55).

## APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE SYLLABUS

**-----: English --- [Section -----]  
(Mon & Wed 2 – 4:12pm)**

Instructor: -----

Email: -----

Web Page: -----

*English Skills* (8<sup>th</sup> ed), John Langan (2 copies available in the library)

*The Least You Should Know About English* (9<sup>th</sup> ed), Wilson et. al. (2 copies available in library)

J. M. Beach, *Educating for Democracy: Reading and Responding* (2 copies available in library)

A **Dictionary** is required: you need to bring it to class

**(Please buy all your books by the first week)**

### Course Description:

In this class you will learn the principles of effective written expression starting with a review of grammar, mechanics, and usage of American English. The class will also review the paragraph form and you will learn how to effectively construct college level paragraphs with main ideas and supporting examples/evidence.

### Learning Objectives: Students will be able to...

Demonstrate mastery of grammatically correct sentences as well as being able to employ a variety of sentence patterns in an effort towards writing developed paragraphs and a developed essay.

Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Recognize and apply correct sentence structure in a variety of patterns
2. Employ correct grammatical usage
3. Demonstrate understanding of basic rules of punctuation
4. Use proper spelling of commonly misspelled words
5. Construct a basic paragraph
6. Apply the patters of description and generalizations supported by examples to a basic paragraph
7. Identify key ideas in texts

## Class Policies:

- 1) **Attendance is mandatory** Roll is taken promptly at the beginning of class.
  - 3 absence = B or lower Grade automatically
  - 4 absences = C or lower Grade automatically
  - 5 or more absences = F (automatic Failure) unless they are emergencies**

\*Excessive lateness will result in the equivalent penalties as an absence
  
- 2) **NO LATE WORK.** Please be organized and plan ahead. Exceptions will be made in the case of a medical or family emergency IF you contact me ahead of time.
  
- 3) **Plagiarism** is basically using someone else's thoughts, ideas, words without properly citing the work (i.e. letting the reader know whose thoughts, ideas, or words are being used and where you got the information from). It is especially important at the college level to CITE every piece of information that you borrow in your essays using the appropriate citation method. If you do not cite a particular piece of information or quoted material than it is considered PLAGIARISM, which is a form of STEALING and it is a very serious offence. If you are caught plagiarizing at any time during this course you will receive an **AUTOMATIC F** as your course grade.
 

**\*\*Note: Always play it safe. If you use a piece of information, any information, tell your reader where it came from and properly cite the source. If you ALWAYS do this you will never run into trouble with plagiarism.**
  
- 4) The **Writing and Reading Center** is located in the Library, room AD 126  
To Pass you must use the Writing Center a total of **18 hours**.
  
- 5) **CELL PHONES OFF.** Please make sure to turn your cell phones off during class as a courtesy to your instructor and classmates. This is standard policy for all colleges.
  
- 6) By coming to class you have agreed to participate. If you are not participating, if you are off task, or if you are distracting from the learning environment, then you will be asked to leave and it will be marked as an absent for the day.
  
- 7) The last day to withdraw from this class with a "W" grade is \_\_\_\_\_

**PARTICIPATION & WEEKLY COURSE WORK****50%**

- I. Vocabulary & Sentences
- II. Book work
- III. In-class activities

**QUIZZES & PARAGRAPHS****50%**

- I. Quizzes & Comprehensive Tests 25%
- II. Paragraph Portfolios 25%

**EXTRA CREDIT**

- I. If you correct all grammar quizzes, they can be returned for 10pt extra credit
- 

**Course Contract**

This syllabus is a contract. By signing this syllabus you agree to participate in this course and abide by the class policies. By signing you agree to participate in a learning process and you agree to give as much effort as possible to succeed in this course. If you do not participate in this course or abide by the class policies then the instructor will ask you to drop this course. The instructor will present materials, facilitate class times, grade assignments, and conference with students, but only you can make learning take place, and only you can practice and master the material.

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in this course, abide by the class policies, and do my best to learn, practice, and master the material in this course.

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to teach this course, present materials, facilitate class times, grade your assignments, conference with you, and help you learn during this course.

- Week 1: Buy Books, Syllabus, and start first week's assignment (Intro to Dictionary)
- Week 2            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass- Exercises
- Week 3            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 4            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 5            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 6            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 7            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 8            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 9            Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises
- Week 10           Mon: Discuss & Do Bookwork  
                      Wed: Correct Bookwork; Quiz; Vocabulary; Inclass-Exercises  
**HOMEWORK: Langan Practice Test on pages 557-582 (Due on Monday)**
- Week 11           Mon: Comprehensive Tests (Part 1: individual test; Part 2: group test)  
                      Wed: Langan Paragraph Bookwork
- Week 12           Mon: Paragraph Bookwork  
                      Wed: Write paragraph (2 drafts & final draft due on Monday)
- Week 13           Mon: Paragraph Bookwork  
                      Wed: Write paragraph (2 drafts & final draft due on Monday)
- Week 14           Mon: Paragraph Bookwork  
                      Wed: Write paragraph (2 drafts & final draft due on Monday)
- Week 15           Mon: Paragraph Bookwork  
                      Wed: Write paragraph (2 drafts & final draft due on Monday)
- Week 16           FINALS WEEK: Course Evaluation & Party

## Course Assignment Checklist

### **GRAMMAR SKILLS (Wilson, *The Least You Should Know*)**

- 1     \_\_\_ Dictionary & 8 Parts of Speech (Wilson 55-60, 23-28)
- 2     \_\_\_ Commonly Confused Words (Wilson 4-22)
- 3     \_\_\_ Subjects & Verbs (Wilson 63-68, 118-124)
- 4     \_\_\_ Prepositions & Pronouns (Wilson 69-74, 154-161)
- 5     \_\_\_ Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs (Wilson 97-117, 29-35)
- 6     \_\_\_ Ind. & Dep. Clauses, Fragments, Run-Ons (Wilson 75 – 96)
- 7     \_\_\_ Sentence Patterns & Dangling Modifiers (Wilson 137-43, 133-136)
- 8     \_\_\_ Commas (Wilson 174-188)
- 9     \_\_\_ Punctuation & Capitol Letters (Wilson 167-173, 189-201)
- 10    \_\_\_ Practice Test (Langan 557-582)

### **PARAGRAPH SKILLS (Langan, *Writing Skills*)**

- |                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1     ___ Langan 49 – 55   | 2     ___ Langan 55 – 64 |
| 3     ___ Langan 71 – 85   | 4     ___ Langan 88 – 99 |
| 5     ___ Langan 103 – 109 |                          |

### **VOCABULARY**

9 weeks of vocabulary

1\_\_ 2\_\_ 3\_\_ 4\_\_ 5\_\_ 6\_\_ 7\_\_ 8\_\_ 9\_\_

**WRITING PARAGRAPHS:** We will write 11 Paragraphs total

Paragraphs: 1\_\_ 2\_\_ 3\_\_ 4\_\_ 5\_\_

## APPENDIX 2: EDITING A DRAFT WORKSHEET (condensed for this appendix)

## Editing a Draft

---

### Evaluative Standards for Effective Writing

(Please mark categories with + or – and explain marks in box below)

#### **FORM (Quality of Writing)**

- \_\_\_ Introduction of subject
- \_\_\_ Topic Sentence w/ main point
- \_\_\_ Transitions
- \_\_\_ Grammar & Sentence Clarity
- \_\_\_ Supporting points
- \_\_\_ Conclusion restates main idea
- \_\_\_ Conclusion ends with concluding remark

#### **CONTENT (Quality of Thinking)**

- \_\_\_ Clear & Detailed topic sentence
- \_\_\_ Organized (transitions link ideas)
- \_\_\_ Detailed supporting points
- \_\_\_ Fully Developed & Explained Ideas

Draft Evaluation

## APPENDIX 3: STUDENT EVALUATION

Student Evaluation
--------------------

**STUDENT SKILLS**

- Attendance
- Punctuality
- Remembers Due-Dates
- Participation (in Class)
- Stays on Task (in Class)
- Communicates w/ Instructor
- Respectful to Learning Environment & Students

**LEARNING SKILLS**

- Completes all Homework
- Satisfactory Grades (C + or better)
- Asks Questions
- Visits Writing Center Regularly

**WRITING SKILLS**

- Knows General Grammar
- Vocabulary
- Clear Sentence Structure
- Paragraph Skills
- Edits & Completes Multiple Drafts

**COLLEGE PLAN**

- Clear Goal?
- Met with Counseling Center?
- Planned out Required Courses?
- Completed Official Plan?
- Researched Program or Transfer Requirements?

## APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE STUDENT COURSE EVALUATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: African American African Latino/a East Asian West Asian (India/Middle East) Pacific Islander  
White/non-Latino/a Native American Other

Gender: Male Female

Age: Under 18 18-22 23-28 29-40 40-50 Over 50

How long have you been in college: 1st semester 2nd semester 2nd year 3rd year 4th year 5+ years

Do you have or take care of children: yes no

Rate these statements	Very True					Not True				
I go to class everyday	1	2	3	4	5					
I work hard on homework	1	2	3	4	5					
I participate and I'm an active learner in class	1	2	3	4	5					
In enjoy coming to class	1	2	3	4	5					
I think my writing skills are improving	1	2	3	4	5					
I learned a lot from my teacher	1	2	3	4	5					
My teacher is a good teacher	1	2	3	4	5					
I would take this teacher again	1	2	3	4	5					

**Estimate how many hours you spend per week**

Hours a week I spent in class this semester	4(1class)	8 (2class)	12(3class)	16(4class)	16+		
Hours a week I spend on homework/studying for <u>all</u> my classes	none	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Hours a week I spent in writing center	none	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Hours a week I spend with my family	none	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Hours a week I spent with friends (not studying)	none	2	4	6	8	10	12+
Hours a week I watch t.v. or movies	none	2	4	6	8	10	12+
Hours a week I work	none	1 – 10	11- 20	21- 30	31 – 40	40+	

On the back of this piece of paper, please write 1 complete paragraph about this course, the teacher, and what you learned.

## Work Cited

- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA). (2001, February). *Access denied: Restoring the nation's commitment to equal educational opportunity*. Washington, D. C.: Author. Retrieved December 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/ACSFA>
- . (2002, June). *Empty promises: The myth of college access in America*. Washington, D. C.: Author. Retrieved December 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/ACSFA>
- . (2006, September). *An economic analysis of textbook pricing and textbook markets*. Washington, D. C.: Author. Retrieved December 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/ACSFA>
- . (2007, May). *Turn the page: Making college textbooks more affordable*. Washington, D. C.: Author. Retrieved December 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/ACSFA>
- Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Badway, N. N. and Laanan, F. S. (2007, April). *Evaluating transportability of instructional innovation in vocational education: Moving beyond the principle of entirety*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Tampa, FL.
- Bargal, D. (2006). "Personal and intellectual influences leading to Lewin's paradigm of action research." *Action Research*, 4(4), 367-388.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Buckman, K. (2007, Fall). "What counts as assessment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" *Thought & Action*, 23, 29-37.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A Grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Center for Student Success & The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges. (2007, March). *Basic skills as a foundation for student success in California community colleges*. Sacramento, CA: California Community Colleges (CCC) Systems Office.
- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (2007). *Chancellor's Office data mart*. Retrieved March 2007, from <http://www.cccco.edu/divisions/tris/mis/reports.htm>

- Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Free Press. (Original work published 1916).
- . (1997). *Experience & Education*. New York: Touchstone. (Original work published 1938).
- Dick, B. (2006). "Action research literature 2004-2006: Themes and trends." *Action Research*, 4(4), 439-458.
- Douglass, J. A. (2007). *The Conditions for admission: Access, equity, and the social contract of public universities*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Miller-Buchanan, C., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & MacIver, D. (1993, Feb). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, 48(2), 90-101.
- Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- . (1982). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- . (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Graff, G. (2003). *Clueless in academe: How schooling obscures the life of the mind*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2006). "They say / I say:" *The moves that matter in academic writing*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Good, T. L. & Grouws, D. A. (1977, May-June). Teaching effects: A process-product study in fourth-grade mathematics classrooms. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 28(3), 49-54.
- Grills, A. E. & Ollendick, T. H. (2002). Peer victimization, global self-worth, & anxiety in middle school children. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 31(1), 59-68.
- Grubb, W. N. (1999). *Honored But Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges*. New York: Routledge.
- Harter, S., Waters, P. L., & Whitesell, N. (1997). Lack of voice as a manifestation of false self-behavior among adolescents: The school setting as a stage upon which the drama of authenticity is enacted. *Educational Psychologist*, 32(3), 153-173.

- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2005). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hudley, C. & Graham, S. (1993). An attributional intervention to reduce peer-directed aggression among African-American boys. *Child Development*, 64, 124-38.
- League for Innovation in the Community College. (2004, August). *An assessment framework for the community college: Measuring student learning and achievement as a means of demonstrating institutional effectiveness*. Version 1.0. Phoenix, AZ: Author. Retrieved May 2007, from <http://http://www.league.org/publication/whitepapers/index.html>
- Levin, J. & Montero-Hernandez, V. (2007, November). *Redefining community colleges as sites of resistance and co-construction: The case of Bakersfield College*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Louisville, KY.
- Lindemann, E. (1995). *A rhetoric for writing teachers*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McLoyd, V. C. (1998, Feb). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American Psychologist*, 53(2), 185-204.
- Nasir, N. S. & Hand, V. M. (2006, Winter). Exploring sociocultural perspectives on race, culture, and learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 449-75.
- Neilsen, E. H. (2006). "But let us not forget John Collier." *Action Research*, 4(4), 389-399.
- Nolen, A. L. & Vander Putten, J. (2007, October). "Action research in education: Addressing gaps in ethical principles and practices." *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 401-407.
- Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Finding and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pomerantz, E. M., Altermatt, E. R., & Saxon, J. L. (2002). Making the grade but feeling distressed: Gender differences in academic performance and internal distress. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 94(2), 396-404.
- Rouseff-Baker, F., & Holm, A. (2004, Summer). "Engaging faculty and students in classroom assessment of learning." *New Directions for Community Colleges* (pp. 29 - 42), no. 126. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ryan, A. M., Gheen, M. H., & Midgley, C. (1998). Why do some students avoid asking for help? An examination of the interplay among students' academic efficacy, teachers' social-emotional role, and the classroom goal structure. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(3), 528-35.

- Ryan, R. M. & Stiller, J. (1991). The social contexts of internalization: Parent and teacher influences on autonomy, motivation, and learning. *Advances in Motivation and Achievement*, 7, 115-149.
- Steinberg, L., Dornbusch, S. M., & Brown, B. B. (1992, June). Ethnic differences in adolescent achievement: An ecological perspective. *American Psychologist*, 47(6), 723-29.
- Weaver, C. (2007). *Teaching Grammar in Context*. In S. N. Bernstein (Ed.). *Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (pp. 153-161). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. (Original work published 1996).
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wentzel, K. R. (2002, Jan/Feb). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development*, 73(1), 287-301.
- Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J. & Mortimer, J. T. (2006, Winter). Adolescent work, vocational development, and education. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 537-66.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Freire (1998) argued, “There is no such thing as teaching without research” (35). He also argued that the act of teaching “create[s] possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge” (49).

<sup>2</sup> See < <http://www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/index.php> >

<sup>3</sup> See < <http://www.parkland.edu/cetl/index.html> >

<sup>4</sup> See < <http://www.parkland.edu/cetl/programs.html#cat> >

<sup>5</sup> I focus on a basic skills writing course because I agree with Grubb (1999) that “developmental education is one of the most difficult teaching challenges and needs to be rescued from its second-class status” (p. 174). I hope that the framework provided in this paper can serve as both a method and a challenge to writing instructors to further perfect their work.

<sup>6</sup> Grubb (1999) makes a similar argument, although he seems to limit it to part-time faculty (p. 200), but in general he seems to indict the whole community college faculty for sub-standard teaching and curriculum development.

<sup>7</sup> Grubb (1999) alludes to the insufficiency of relying only on the approved “standards” for a course, but he does not criticize this practice sufficiently, although he does make reference to larger issue which I develop further in this essay. Grubb wrote: “the standards developed for transfer courses are based on the syllabus and content of a course, not on issues of pedagogy or how that content is delivered. Therefore the real content – the curriculum actually taught, rather than the formal curriculum – may be quite different from that envisioned in articulation agreements” (p. 236).

<sup>8</sup> Wenger encourages educators to question the assumption that teaching “causes learning.” Instead, Wenger argues, “learning happens in “response to the pedagogical intentions of the setting:” “Instruction does not cause learning; it creates a context in which learning takes place, as do other contexts” (p. 266). And because learning through practice is so important to Wenger, he conceptualizes the role of educators as more than the deliverers of

---

information or the creators of educational infrastructures. He points out that educators “constitute learning resources” through their “own membership in relevant communities of practice” (p. 276).

<sup>9</sup> Grubb (1999) points out that many basic skills instructors in English and Math do not “know enough about history, sociology, or business to carry the discussion forward in a responsible way, and therefore abandoned any content” (p. 185). He further states: “Many instructors solve the problem of content by making grammar or arithmetic the content of remediation, without any application” (p. 184).

<sup>10</sup> The reader might be confused by the way I am using the terms “themes” and “theory.” Themes refer to recurrent and central thematic ideas that might appear over and over again in a course. For instance, the “themes” in my pre-college writing class are the central ideas of American democracy, access, equality, and discrimination, but I also structure in the composition theory of academic literacy, writing as conversations, and the craft of composition as I define it for my students.

<sup>11</sup> For the California State Board of Education content standards see: < <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/enggrades11-12.asp> >. For the Reading & Language Arts curriculum framework see: < <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/rlafw.pdf> >. For an overview of California curricular standards and tests see: < <http://www.csun.edu/~hcbio027/k12standards/> >. For a basic overview of University of California expectations see: < <http://www.ucop.edu/a-gGuide/ag/a-g/welcome.html> >

<sup>12</sup> Instructors can get a sense of the larger picture of higher education in many ways. For instance, Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) offer a large volume of research on students and college; a historical overview of the evolution of higher education in a particular state, like California (Douglass, 2007), could also be helpful; and a discipline specific critique of the larger academy could be very informative, like Gerald Graff’s English Studies oriented *Clueless in Academe* (2003). It is also important to mention the fact that most instructors in English in higher education have not been properly trained in composition and rhetoric, and therefore, it is important to have at least some exposure to the larger framework of the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric within the larger field of English Studies. Books on the subject range from highly structured, discipline oriented textbooks (Lindemann 1995), to more informal discussions of writing (Elbow 1981), to more complex philosophical analyses of rhetoric and social theory (Burke 1969).