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Embracing Student Potential: Creating Space for Intrinsic Motivation in Community College Developmental Reading Classes

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In spite of the fact that at some community colleges well over half of the students take at least one developmental course (Bailey, Jeong and Cho), developmental classes are often overlooked as important research sites. Those of us who are developmental instructors understand the precarious nature of what we do and where we exist in the academic hierarchy. Somewhere in the years between K-12 and 12-16 we are responsible for helping students, who generally have an overwhelmingly negative experience with school (Boylan), navigate the murky waters of transition between “to have or to have not a college degree.” Casazza and Silverman state that developmental educators strive to help students “realize their greatest potential as they work toward their goals” (260). However, an examination of traditional materials and practice in developmental reading reveals a heavy focus on decontextualized reading skills and very little attention to student “potential.”

In order to address this issue I shifted the instruction in my developmental reading classes from a focus solely on skill development to one that included a means for students to observe, make and understand connections between reading and personal growth while simultaneously developing their reading skills. I wanted them to appropriate reading as a deeply meaningful part of their personhood and future potential, and I wanted to empower students to take ownership of their learning process. I decided to combine constructivist, culturally responsive and

critical literacy pedagogical approaches, and as a result began to create what has now become *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* (Williams).

Constructivist Practice and Culturally Responsive Approaches

Constructivist practice is derived from a combination of a variety of theories including cognitivism and socio-cultural learning theory. My goals as a constructivist educator included incorporating the following instructional strategies: problem-solving, constructing information, using prior knowledge and experience, positioning students as authorities of their own experience, reading and learning about relevant information, reflecting on and activating cognitive schemas. Constructivist discourse is focused on growth and expansion of the mind through the construction of knowledge, communal learning activities and various forms of experience, process and reflection. Learning is defined as an intrinsically motivated internal process that can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, including but not limited to the “testable” (Bean; Brookfield; Bruffee; Bruffee; Bruner; Chamblee; Dewey; Freire; Gordon; Hyslop-Margison and Strobel; Liu and Matthews)

In searching for appropriate empowering pedagogy I explored culturally responsive approaches because the demographics of the student population in my classes, on average, include about 97% black and about 40% male students. I was particularly concerned about retention issues and achievement gaps facing black males, and I generally explored pedagogical approaches that would meet the needs of my relatively low-income, black, inner-city student population (Flaxman; Watson, Kehler and Martino).

A culturally responsive approach to teaching includes: acknowledging students’ cultural heritage and the effect that such heritage has on student learning, attitudes and meaning creation; acknowledging connections between class content and students lived realities; using a wide variety of instructional strategies; using text and activities that require students to examine their place in society;

using text and activities that inspire students to make positive life and educational choices; using text and activities that encourage students to embrace their cultural heritage, while requiring academic excellence (Gay; Ladson-Billings; Tatum).

Another pedagogical approach I employed with empowerment as the focus is Critical Literacy. The purposes of critical literacy are very much in line with the ideas involved in culturally responsive approaches. In particular, both perspectives have the central goal of “rehumanizing” oppressed people. “Rehumanizing” is a term that Paulo Freire uses because he equates the effects of oppression with dehumanization. Freire explains that oppressed people have internalized the negative stereotypes that the higher classes have of them. He views education as a means for restoring oppressed people to fully functioning, critically thinking members of society:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end may become convinced of their own unfitness. (45)

The “(re)humanizing” process associated with education, though not expressed with that term, is also in line with Culturally Responsive approaches. The underlying assumption of both approaches is that people who are disempowered, in one way or another, lose a piece of the human spirit where hope and positive future action connect. The approaches strive both to educate oppressed people about the forces within themselves and society responsible for oppression and move them to action to overcome that oppression.

A Critical Literacy curriculum is co-created with students, using ethnographic methods to uncover generative themes, that is, issues and interest common to a specific group of students rooted in their specific experiences of

disenfranchisement. Critical Literacy methodology requires that students take an “ethnographic stance” to explore the nature of their social positions in society (Green & Bloome). That is, students learn to observe actions and discourse over time from the perspective of insiders, or what counts as action and discourse within a particular context (e.g., a classroom). Critical literacy also requires that students, in response to their ethnographic explorations, reflect on their experiences as oppressed people and take action to change their situations.¹

Designing a Supplemental Workbook

I designed *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* to address a generative theme of my students. Based on conversations with students, colleagues, research, and a general understanding of the community surrounding the school, I recognized that one of the most prevalent problems is the scarcity of positive black male-role models. I chose this as a generative theme because of the incredible effect that this problem has on all members of the black community, regardless of age or gender. The deep hole that is left in communities where males are not thriving is inexplicable and felt in some way by every member. Ultimately, everyone in a community depends on men in one way or another as providers, friends and family members. When men are gone or unable to support the people around them, their positive presence is sorely missed and communities are deleteriously affected² (Gadsden and Ray; Gadsden, Wortham and Wojcik; Coley; Heiss).

To address the generative theme of black male

1 In terms of Critical Literacy “curriculum” has to be put in quotes because the connotation of the word is somewhat more static than what actually happens when using a Critical Literacy methodology. Because the focus of the “curriculum” is created by the specific group being taught it should change as group members change if the methods are applied in the “purest” form. In fact, because of the longevity and inflexible nature of textbooks a Critical Literacy “textbook” is an oxymoron. My choices of approaches are informed by a combination of the demographics of my students my background as a qualitative researcher and feasibility of implementation.

2 In choosing black male role models as a generative theme, I do not mean to suggest that feminine issues are less important. The next step in this project is to expand the text to address generative themes of females and people and other cultures. Due to the extremely low retention rates of African-American males and the experimental nature of the pedagogical approach in this field, this initial design was crucial.

role models from a constructivist and critical perspective I used Alfred Tatum's concept of "Enabling Text" to choose reading selections: "An enabling text...is one that moves beyond a solely cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus." I chose (auto)biographical stories of black men who came from humble beginnings and used reading to overcome difficult life circumstances. Two of the men also went to community college. The reading selections that are not autobiographical address issues of leadership, concepts of manhood and fatherhood. In the workbook each reading selection was adapted with scaffolded skills, activities that require students to deconstruct the text for content and structure, study contextualized vocabulary words in terms of their significance to the stories, as well as engage in various forms of reflection including metacognitive, personal, interpretive and conceptual. The activities that correspond to each reading also involve problem solving, group work and kinesthetic activities.

(The development of the *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* curriculum is in the initial stages. This process of creation is recursive, meaning that other instructors using the text and I continue to ask the students about their experiences, collect samples of student work, conduct analysis and expand and revise.)

The new pedagogical approach allows the students to engage in the reflective "(re)humanizing process" that is the goal of both the culturally responsive and critical literacy approaches. By showing the results of an initial analysis of student work I will demonstrate that the pedagogical approach made space for the intersection of the personal and academic, consequently leading to intrinsic motivation and personal growth.

Methods

To look for evidence of students' personal connections to and personal growth as a result of engaging with reading selections, one has to start by uncovering that which is considered "personal" or "important" to students¹. Once the "personal" and "areas of growth" have been identified the researcher can look for evidence of both in students' written responses to the readings. I conducted the analysis

of students' writing in steps using two ethnographic methods. First, I did a semantic analysis (Spradley) and, second, I did a thematic analysis (Kvale 326).

According to James Spradley, one way to understand the culture of a group of people is to explore the way that they use language to create common understandings and cultural categories or, as Spradley calls them, *domains*. To illustrate, consider the word "bad." In certain communities "bad" means something undesirable, but in other communities "bad" is a means for expressing admiration. Essentially, a semantic analysis is a search for all the perspectives or definitions that can be included or excluded from the meaning of a cultural concept. In order to uncover my students' "personal struggles" or "areas of growth" I used the semantic relationship "x is a type of obstacle" to academic success (see Table 1 in Appendix).

A thematic analysis involves an examination of a set of transcripts or, in this case, a set of students written responses to reading selections. The data set is then carefully examined for reoccurring statements, concepts, and subjects. In short, if a certain "subject" consistently reoccurs across the data set, the researcher can interpret that finding in light of the content and context. During this second stage I examined student work for evidence of connections that participants made between their "personal struggles" and/or "areas of growth" and the content of the reading selections (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Analysis Stage One and Discussion:

Obstacles to Learning

Two of the reading selections in the Engaging Literacy curriculum are an interview with General Colin Powell and a short biography of his career. After completing the reading, the students and I had a discussion about the obstacles that General Powell faced, and we determined which of the obstacles were societal (i.e., out of his control, e.g., racism) and which of the obstacles were personal (i.e., within his control, e.g., his aversion to reading). After making these lists as a class, the students made similar lists for themselves. They were asked to first write down everything that they believed hindered them from being successful in school; then, they were asked to divide that list into the personal and societal categories. Using the

students' obstacles list, I was able to conduct the domain analysis and uncover their stated obstacles to academic success. From that analysis I found thirty categories based on items in the students' list that reoccurred. Table 1 in the Appendix is a representation of the categories that came from those lists.

Although there are many interesting observations I gleaned from the data, for the purpose of this paper I would like to focus on the fact that out of thirty categories only four were directly related to academic skills: confusion (7); self-doubt in academic abilities (3); learning disabilities (7); history of struggling academically (10). Of the four that were related to academic skills, two were related to students' understanding of themselves as learners via negative past experiences (self doubt and history of struggling academically).

In terms of practice and the specific needs of the developmental student population, when instructors use the traditional focus on decontextualized skills, they have no means for addressing the other twenty-six categories that students perceive to be obstacles to their academic success, nor do they have a means for addressing students' poor academic self-concepts. In contrast, in constructivists, culturally responsive and critical literacy approaches demonstrating thinking through a process of verbal and written reflection and discussion about relevant issues are necessary and justifiable ways to engage in skill development and to show improved habits of mind and learning. This is not to suggest that a reading development class is a space for "psychological" counseling and revelation of inappropriate personal issues. However, classrooms in general are spaces where academic failures and successes happen, thus "academic identities" are inevitably constructed. Creating space for students to reflect on their development as learners, relative to the context of their life, is an important aspect of education that a central focus on "skill development" cannot address.

Analysis Stage Two and Discussion:

Thematic Connections

One of the first readings requiring a formal writing assignment was the story of Kala White, an African-American young man who dropped out of high school and

lived a "street" life until his cousin was shot. The death of his cousin prompted him to return to school and move his life in a more positive direction. After reading the Kala White story, students were required to meet in literature clubs (Schlick Noe and Johnson) and write a response essay (Williams). When responding to reading selections, students were given the choice of writing about one of three types of connections: text to self, text to text or text to world (Keene and Zimmerman).³ Thematically analyzing students' responses to the readings involved looking for evidence of the personal struggles categorized through the domain analysis in their writing. Table 2 includes samples of students' writing in the left column and the corresponding category from the domain analysis in the far right column.⁴ The race/ethnicity of the student is identified in the center column.⁴ The representative samples in Table 2 show that many students chose to use the assignment as an opportunity to reflect on their obstacles to learning.

In the first excerpt the writer reflects on the similarities and differences between his father's life and Kala White's life. Based on the way that the writer explains his father's unfitting end, it can reasonably be inferred that he recognized the importance of Kala's decision to focus on school instead of the "street" life. In the second excerpts, two female writers provide detailed reflections of the similarities between their experiences of almost dropping out of school and Kala White's experience. Included in these reflections, both women mention the catalyst that prompted them to stay enrolled in school. These data show that a reoccurring theme in the student responses to the reading selections using the *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* program is "affirmation of right choices." In terms of personal growth and academic self-concept, I reasonably inferred that the writers' decisions to enroll in college classes have been reaffirmed while simultaneously engaging in critical reading, critical

3 Text connections are relationships that a reader creates between the content of a reading selection and something else. A text to self-connection is a connection to a reader's life, a text-to-text connection is a connection to another text and a text to world connection is a connection to something in the community or broader society.

4 A discussion of race is beyond the scope of the paper however I included the race/ethnicity of the student in the table 2 to demonstrate that not only African-American males in my classes drew personal connections to the reading selections.

thinking, reading skill development and writing.

Other student writing excerpts also demonstrate the personal connections and intrinsic motivation for which the *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* curriculum created space. For example, after reading a speech by President Barrack Obama on fathers (delivered 6/15/2008 at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago), one of my African-American female students wrote:

On a personal note I know of my father, but never really knew him, I never really had an opportunity to see or read what a true father is or can be. I just wanted to say thank you because now through this reading I finally have a little understanding.

This excerpt demonstrates that the Critical Literacy method of using generative themes provides students with content that is personally meaningful. One can only speculate on how this reading has affected this woman's future in terms of understanding what she missed from her father and possibly in terms of what she will look for in a future partner. The point, however, is not this student's understanding of her relationships with men; rather, the point is that the student was thankful for the reading selection. This demonstrates the development of an appreciation for the connection between reading and her life circumstances.

The domain and thematic analysis of student writing using the *Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement* texts, demonstrates how students were intrinsically motivated to begin their personal processes of reflection and (re)humanization. It is important to note that the Colin Powell obstacle list was actually one of the activities that we did toward the end of the semester. The fact that the writing samples displayed here were written before the obstacles list was created demonstrates that students wrote about—on their own accord—their personal obstacles and used the readings/writings for self-introspection regarding their perceived obstacles. Corresponding with Alfred Tatum's assertion that class content is most effective when it addresses the obstacles that students face in their lived

realities, this approach allows students to contextualize reading development and academic work within an intrinsic process of personal empowerment, maturation and progress.

Engaging Literacy! Urban Achievement is an example of the intrinsically motivating academic journey shared between students and instructors, when the confines of a central focus on skill development are released. From this perspective, my colleagues and I do not only claim to “try to help” students realize their “greatest potential,” we engage students in an empowering process that provides the space for them to uncover and define their own potential. Ultimately, it is this placement of power over their own lives into their hands that will most enable them to persist.

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About the Author

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Appendix

Table 1: Domain Analysis Constructed from Students' Lists

- *Forty – three lists were collected*
- *For this initial analysis if more than one student listed something as an obstacle I counted it as a category.*

Category	Number of Students	Category	Number of Students
Body image	8 (6 males, 2 females)	Relationships	26
Peer pressure	11	Parents/Family (drugs-mental illness)	7
Fighting	7	Procrastination	9
Depression	4	Hanging out	4
Frustration/anger	5	Emotional (girls)	6
Loneliness	5	Lazy	8
Confusion	7	Disorganized	9
Self doubt	3	Skin color/race	10
Neighborhood	14	Learning disabilities	7
Money	10	Personal addictions (shopping, sex, drugs)	6
Death of loved ones	7	Working	6
Police harassment	2	Victim of violence	2
Mental wellness	2	Lack of focus	5
Gender (middle eastern females)	2	Jail	2
Parenting	4	History of struggling academically	10

Table 2: Student Examples

Student Excerpts	Race/Ethnicity	Students' Obstacles Addressed
Kala White's story seem similar to my father's situation, but my father did not realize that he was wasting his life living the street way. My connection is that my father did the same thing Kala White did around his age, running the streets and smoking marijuana. Thinking fast money was the way to get money he did not want to get a real job working so he continued to hustle selling drugs. Well, one day my father was out on the block around like midnight still hustling and these boys walked up to him and robbed him for everything. Well my father just like Kala White thought he was big and bad and tried to fight both of them even though they had a weapon. He was shot five times but still lived...After he came home from the hospital he still lived that street life...Now he is behind bars for 15 years for possession of drugs.	<i>Black male</i>	<i>Family relationships</i> <i>Neighborhood violence</i>
I thought the story Kala White, was definitely inspiring and amazing, I found Kala White to be inspiring and amazing because it shows no matter what is going on in a person's life, you can still be educated. Kala White had so much motivation and determination. He literally grew up off the streets and was headed the wrong direction in life but shows no matter where you are in life, you are never to young to learn and be educated. I learned many new things from this story. I felt that I could definitely connect with Kala because growing up I had somewhat the similar attitude towards life like Kala. Kala's goals in life were to be a rapper and figured school was cutting into his life so he decided to drop out. His work ethics were horrible. I had a similar experience. I hated school. I felt if I just drop out of high school and just get my GED I would be fine. I had started slacking in my school work and my attendance. I was very close to dropping out and then I had something big happened and I ended up changing my ways...	<i>White Female</i>	<i>Lack of focus</i> <i>Hanging out</i>
Kala White favors me, back when I was in the 10 th grade... I never told anyone this, but I almost dropped out of school and joined a gang. But I saw how those people lived and I despised all they did was drink, smoke, steel and kill. I could never do anything like that, my psyche would never let me live in peace. On page 108 line 10 he says "I spent my time where the talk was about robbing people, robbing banks, and trucks. I a rookie at this new life, as trying to learn all the rules of the street before I crossed over" that stuck out to me because I felt the same way. It was not an easy habit to give up, I had two persevere and a positive role model had to give me some tough and harsh words of wisdom.	<i>Black female</i>	<i>Peer pressure relationships</i>

(Endnotes)

1 The analysis of student writings was conducted after the class was over. The presentation of student work in this article reflects the sequence of the analysis not the order in which the assignments were completed.