"The More Mistakes You Have the Better You Could Improve": Two Students' Interpretations of Pedagogy in Developmental and College English

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the learning experiences of two students in the same college-level English course at Urban Serving Community College (USCC) (pseudonym). The objective was to understand how one student met with success and the other failure despite both successfully completing their developmental English course the semester prior. I observed 19 class sessions throughout the semester, interviewed the professor twice, and interviewed the students at the end of the course. The analysis drew upon the field notes, interviews, and course documents (i.e., syllabus, rubric, assignments, etc.). The key feature of the professor's course design and pedagogy was to provide students detailed feedback on their writing assignments according to the expectation for college-level writing and then provide opportunities to revise and resubmit. The student who failed the course consistently interpreted the professor's feedback as telling him what to write; thus, he was never able to revise his essays in ways that would meet the expectations for college-level writing. The student who interpreted the feedback as indicating areas where she needed to communicate more clearly her ideas according to the expectations for college-level writing developed her ability to independently write college-level essays. The findings suggest assessments focusing students upon developing revision practices better positions them to succeed; however, some students might not be prepared to interpret those assessment practices in productive ways.

The focus of this analysis is Lamar and Sofia (pseudonyms), two students who were enrolled in developmental English at Urban Serving Community College (USCC) (pseudonym) the semester before I met them in a linked college-level English/developmental reading course I was observing as part of a larger, semester-long study. For Lamar and Sofia, their developmental education experiences were likely critical to their college success. Indeed, large-scale survey research suggests that students who complete their developmental sequence and enroll in a college-level course can achieve the same short-term (i.e., fall-to-fall persistence) and long-term (i.e., degree attainment/transfer) outcomes as students deemed prepared (Bahr, 2010; Bahr, 2008; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010).

However, most students—an estimated 56%—who enroll in developmental education fail or withdraw before completing their developmental sequence (Bailey et al., 2010). Moreover, a significant number, 25%±, complete their developmental sequence and then enroll and fail a college-level course (Bailey et al., 2010). Of these 25%±, why might some students fail and others pass, assuming similar educational backgrounds and effort? This analysis considers this question from the perspectives of Lamar and Sofia's learning experiences in their college-level English course at USCC taught by Professor Williams (pseudonym). More specifically, the

article explores how Lamar failed and Sofia passed the course despite both students passing developmental English the semester prior, attending every class session generally prepared, completing all of their assignments, and earnestly wanting to pass the course. To understand their different outcomes, I compared and contrasted their learning experiences by isolating a unique subset of observational, interview, and course document data to answer three inter-related research questions: How did each student (a) approach their coursework; (b) interpret Professor Williams's expectations; and (c) interact with his pedagogy?

Review of selected literature

Key themes of the developmental education literature suggest student success can be improved with centrally organized developmental education and mandatory enrollment (Boylan, 2002); limiting the amount of time students spend in developmental education (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Bailey et al., 2010; Jaggars, Hodara, Cho, & Xu, 2015); providing well-coordinated *wrap-around* academic services including academic success courses, mandatory tutoring, and advising (Bailey et al., 2015; Boylan, 2002; Perin, 2004; Perin & Charron, 2006); instituting formal learning communities (Barnes & Piland, 2013; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Malnarich, 2005; Raftery, 2005; Schnee, 2014; Smith, 2010); and providing robust professional development and support for faculty (Bailey et al., 2015; Boylan, 2002; Mellow, Woolis, Klages-Bombich, & Restler, 2015).

While the research into organization and structure is robust, there is much less into the students' leaning experiences in the classroom (Capt & Oliver, 2012; Cox, 2009, 2015; Grubb, 1999, 2013; Hillocks, 1999; MacArthur & Philippakos, 2013; Perun, 2015). Nonetheless, three key themes have emerged across this literature. First, students are most actively engaged in their learning when they are developing their conceptual understanding of a topic (Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2015; Grubb, 1999, 2013; Hillocks, 1999). Grubb (1999, 2013) has consistently reported that content-empty, rote learning practices centered upon basic skills (i.e., grammar exercises and math drills), or "remedial pedagogy," is so tedious for students that it promotes only "the most passive form of learning" (2013, p. 55). The decon-textualized nature of the coursework and resulting disengagement makes it difficult for students to develop an understanding sufficient to apply in future contexts.

Second, students need explicit instruction on how to engage in learning activities and assessments (MacArthur & Philippakos, 2013; Perun, 2015). For example, MacArthur and Philippakos (2013) found that course design and pedagogy focused upon teaching students how to evaluate a writing task in order to understand what was expected and then engage in a revision process grounded in self-assessment based upon the evaluation criteria improved students writing, as well as their confidence in their writing abilities.

Third, students need to feel well supported (Capt & Oliver, 2012; Cox, 2009). For example, Cox reported that the students she interviewed explained how professors who came "down to [the students'] level" and attempted to reflectively understand the ways students "emotionally and cognitively" interacted with the curriculum tended to assuage students' fear and increase their success (p. 114). In fact, Cox found that professors can have a positive impact by inspiring confidence, holding students to high standards, and validating students' college-going ability.

Collectively, the extant literature demonstrates the necessity of understanding how students' engage the pedagogy enacted in their course. This dynamic is key to understanding how students succeed or fail, as well as uncovering pedagogical practices that might better position students for success. By isolating the learning experiences of two students in developmental and college-level English, this study helps illuminate how students' interpretations of pedagogy shape their engagement in a course and, in turn, their success or failure.

Theoretical framework

The learning activities students engage in and how they engage in them are the "response to the implicit or explicit requirements of their teachers" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 64). As importantly, how students engage in these activities is shaped by their disciplinary understandings, personal aims and intents, preconceived notions of teaching and learning, and experiences as a student (both past and present) (Bain, 2004; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998). Similarly, professors develop their curricula and pedagogical approach based upon their disciplinary knowledge, understanding of teaching, expectations for student learning, and perceptions of their students (Bain, 2004; Hillocks, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Accordingly, to learn how students meet with success or failure in a course requires understanding the content being taught, how a professor's pedagogy helps students learn that content (or not), and how students interact with the professor's pedagogy (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003).

Methods

Data collection and participants

To learn how Lamar and Sofia interacted with the pedagogy, coursework, and assessment practices in the same college-level English course, I drew upon a unique subset of observational, interview, and course document data from a semester long, classroom-level study of students' learning experiences in developmental English at USCC. USCC is located in the northeastern United States and is categorized as a very large 2-year college with 18,000+ students, of whom 57% are Black and 8% Latina/o. Approximately 69% of students receive a Pell Grant, and as many as 65% of first time students are mandatorily placed in developmental education using the ACT college admissions test COMPASS.

The course was college-level English linked with a developmental reading during the spring semester of 2012. The courses were semester-long concurrent, corequisites taught by the same professor. While the students earned separate grades for each course, in practice it was essentially one 6-credit course. There was one syllabus that separated out the objectives, assessments, and grading for each course. The courses met back-to-back; therefore, each class session lasted 2 hours (1 hour for each course), and the professor would indicate a change from one to the other by saying something like "now let's shift out attention to our reading homework." The concurrent nature provided the professor much flexibility in learning activities, allowing him to focus more on college-level English or developmental reading as he found necessary.

I observed all three 2-hour class sessions each week for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and then one 2-hour class session each week for the remainder of the semester, documenting 42 hours of classroom interactions with detailed field notes. I also collected over 30 pages of course documents handed out to the students (e.g., syllabus, assignments, rubrics, etc.). I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with the professor during spring break and after the semester, as well as with eight student participants after the semester concluded, two of whom were Lamar and Sofia.

Lamar and Sofia represented a unique subset of data because both students described how their learning experience in developmental English the semester prior were central to their understanding of, and interactions with, the professor's pedagogy. For example, Lamar was only able to report his understanding of Professor Williams's expectations in comparison to those of his developmental English professor, and Sofia, provided thick descriptions of how her developmental English experiences significantly shaped how she engaged Professor Williams's assessment practices. Interviews with the other students did not necessarily uncover how developmental English shaped their experiences in college English.

Analysis

Using NVivo 9 software to organize and analyze qualitative data, I coded the field notes, interview transcripts, and course documents to identify "patterns of behavior, subjects' ways of thinking, and events repeat[ing] and [or] stand[ing] out" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). The findings emerged

from three main analytic themes: Comparisons (students' experience of their college-level course-work compared to their previous learning experiences), Strategies (students' approaches to passing the course), and Pedagogy (the observable efforts of the professor to teach students how to write college-level essays).

Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytic induction process, I entered the coded observational and interview data from Comparison and Strategies into a matrix display to understand the similarities and differences in how the students approached their coursework, and how these approaches were shaped by their previous learning experiences. To understand how these approaches interacted with the enacted pedagogy, and to what extent these interactions shaped success or failure, I compared the individual students' experiences from the data display to the corresponding observational, professor interview, and course documents data coded Pedagogy.

Validity

To help achieve a high level of both descriptive and interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1992), I tested the plausibility of matrix display inferences with the larger data set to remain focused upon understanding the experiences of the participants (etic), rather than my own (emic). Further, I preserved the accuracy of the participants' descriptions and the context in which their perspectives were shaped. Nonetheless, to "make conceptual/theoretical coherence" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 261), the findings presented herein are the product of my reasoned interpretations. Accordingly, as Maxwell (1992) suggested, the theoretical validity rests primarily upon the extent to which the reader is persuaded by the argument.

Findings

The course

According to the syllabus, the objective of the college-level English course was to "write academic essays, which develop significant ideas in a sequence of well-organized paragraphs with a minimum of errors." Eight corresponding learning goals made explicit the required skills to achieve this objective, including "rhetorical development," "paraphrase," "develop essays that incorporate ideas from the text," and "convey meaning." To this end, the course required writing five essays going from a requirement of 500 to 1,200 words worth 80% of the final grade. There was also a 500-word essay for the final exam worth 10% of the final grade. The last 10% of the grade was based upon attendance and participation.

Professor Williams's general course design and pedagogy was intended to help students develop their writing by establishing high standards for college-level writing, having students engage in smaller writing activities that together constituted the foundational requirements for academic writing in general and the assigned essay requirements in particular, and holding students accountable for meeting those standards. He did this by providing multiple opportunities for students to fail, receive formative feedback, and then try again.

The course documents handed out to students, classroom activities, and assessment practices throughout the semester evidenced Professor Williams's pedagogical intents. Course documents fell into four basic categories: classroom discussion activities, essay assignment support, grading rubrics, and student skills activities. This analysis focuses upon the first three. (Note: The last, student skills activities—e.g., taking lecture notes, American Psychological Association [APA] formatting, annotations, etc.—are central to students' success; but these activities were not central to the participant's learning experiences reported here).

Almost every class session began with a discussion activity that required students to use the assigned reading before it was discussed by Professor Williams. Oftentimes, this was an activity sheet

with discussion questions that students worked on together in small groups to begin the class. The questions ranged from the concrete that could be found in the text (e.g., what similarities does the author see between prison and the outside world?) and those that required students to reflect more abstractly about the reading (e.g., why did the author use four examples?).

Many discussion question activities were also writing activities. For example, after reading "Letters from a Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, the students were placed in small groups and given an activity sheet that explained the structure of the essay as "a series of responses to eight clergyman who criticized the civil rights protests." Each group was required to summarize "what the critics said" and "King's response." In this case, the discussion activity doubled as a collaborative writing activity that required students to practice paraphrasing and summarizing. Professor Williams explained his goals with these classroom activities as two-fold:

> ….move students along in developing some sort of analysis of what they've read…[so they're not just] repeating stuff back, but [engaging in] higher order thinking, analysis and application…. I'm trying to get them to think about things and have ideas that they ultimately have something to write about.

And:

> [I'm] framing the kind of activities that we do [as part of a writing assignment] so it's clear, these are bigger ideas about writing….. My goal is for them to see that almost everything we're doing in the class is part of this process and that there aren't discreet skills.

The course documents also demonstrated Professor Williams's support and expectations for students' demonstrating critical analysis, using original ideas, and drawing upon their classroom activities for their writing assignments. The coursework moved from simple tasks (e.g., discussion questions that could be looked up) to increasingly complex tasks (e.g., synthesizing multiple texts in an original analysis in a college-level essay). To this end, the classroom activities provided a high level of support for students to incorporate their reflections on the readings, as well as practice writing skills, like summarizing, into the basis of their essays.

Two weeks before each of the five essays were due, Professor Williams would hand out assignment support materials that always included (a) an essay assignment sheet, (b) a blank essay outline with prompts, and (c) a preparatory activity helpful for the requirements of that particular essay assignment. The essay assignment sheet always included descriptions of the assignment, the audience, the purpose, and the formatting requirements (e.g., APA). For example, the second essay required students to consider how the experiences of the authors of the prison poetry they read supported Foucault's claim that prisons punish souls, not bodies. (Of note, the students read only the first chapter of *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison.*) The audience was described as "readers [who] do not know anything about Foucault or [the poets]," which required the student to "provide enough background information" so that their peers "could all read and follow the ideas in the essay." The purpose section told students explicitly "create your own analysis" using the ideas of the authors.

In addition to the assignment sheet, students also received a brainstorming handout that functioned much like a class discussion activity. In this case, the sheet had prompts for the each of three prison poets to help students uncover how they were punished. For example, for one poet, the two prompts asked "what is the role of the parole board in this poem?" and "how does this [the role of the parole board] punish the soul instead of the body?"

The handouts for all five essays also included a blank outline with prompts that helped students organize their essay into a five paragraph structure according to the requirements of the assignment. In this case, the first line prompted students for a thesis statement: "briefly state your position on the following question: how does [choose one of two prison poets] experiences support Foucault's claim that American prisons punish the soul, not the body?" The second prompt asked for a summary of Foucault's argument, and the next two prompts asked for examples from the prison poets to support the student's position. The final prompt asked for a summary of the analysis.

The essay assignment support handouts were used much the same way as the discussion activity handouts. In the five class sessions leading up to the draft due date, small groups of students worked on these activities, beginning with analyzing the requirements, audience, and purpose detailed in the assignment sheet. The same approach was used for the relevant preparatory activities. For example, the week before the draft was due, students would work in small groups sharing their ideas for their essay outline. This was followed by Professor Williams facilitating a whole-class interactive dialogue asking the students what they might write for each of the blank prompts in the essay outline. As students called out answers mostly drawn from their previously completed classroom discussion activities (e.g., summaries, syntheses, and analyses), he would write them on the board in the outline format. Professor Williams pressed the students to expand upon and/or justify their ideas at each turn, the class session ended with an essay outline on the board and individual outlines with each student.

Finally, in addition to the classroom discussion activities and assignment support handouts, Professor Williams also provided students with grading rubrics for all writing activities including a Summary Writing Rubric, Outline Rubric, Annotation Rubric, and an English 101 Writing Rubric. The English 101 Writing Rubric was the one used to assess their essay assignments. The rubric outlined his expectations for: (a) a "thesis statement that answers the question," (b) "complex synthesis" of the student's own ideas and the ideas of others, and (c) "expression of [these] ideas clearly" using the "organization and language" of academic writing. The analysis of the course document and observations of classroom activities suggest a high degree of alignment with the rubric. Indeed, before the students were expected to write an essay, they were given opportunities and support to develop the ideas they would write about and how they would be organized.

The assessments were intentionally designed to provide students multiple opportunities to write, receive feedback, and revise their essays. All five writing assignments required students to bring a draft of their essay to class for peer review a week before the assignment was due and submit a first formal draft the following week. The formal submission was assessed and returned with written feedback detailing the strengths and weaknesses according to the rubric. Students had one week after the essay was returned to revise and resubmit for a final grade.

Professor Williams's course design and pedagogy promoted a high level of student engagement and learning. However, the interview and observational data suggest that the students' interpretations of Professor Williams's pedagogy shaped their outcomes. Lamar, expected Professor Williams to tell him what to write. Thus, Lamar was unable to see the assignments and assessment practices as opportunities to revise his essays in ways that would meet with Professor Williams's expectations. In contrast, Sofia understood Professor Williams's assessment practices as opportunities to revise in ways valued in higher education. Thus, she was better positioned to interact with Professor Williams's pedagogy and meet his expectations for college-level writing.

"I changed it so that's good": Lamar's experience

Lamar's approach to writing assignments in Professor Williams's course was similar to the approach he used to pass writing assignments in his urban high school and developmental English at USCC the semester prior. In our interview, Lamar explained that in high school his approach to writing assignments was to "just fill in words to have something to hand in." In high school English, this approach earned what he referred to as "passing [grades], low 70 s." He reported that this same approach, with the addition of "fixing sentences" as instructed by his professor, resulted in passing grades, or "Cs" on writing assignments in developmental English the semester prior. Lamar explained in the interview how this approach to essay assignments worked in developmental English:

> She [the developmental English professor] helped me a lot… a couple days, a couple weeks in a row, I came in early when an essay was due and she'd look at it [what I wrote] and then real quick tell me what I did wrong and then I'd revise it real quick before the class started so I could hand it in technically on time.

After "filling in words" Lamar gave his essays to his developmental English professor and asked her to tell him what he did wrong so he could revise it to meet her expectations. From Lamar's perspective, she obliged and then he wrote what he was told. In this way, Lamar's approach to writing and revising in his developmental English course was showing up with a draft essay, asking the professor to "real quick" tell him what he did "wrong," and then "revise it real quick" to fix those errors before submitting it.

Lamar recalled that one such interaction with his developmental English professor focused on her telling him how "she wanted [him] to tell [in the thesis statement] what each paragraph is going to be about without actually saying what paragraph." In this case, Lamar reported that he rewrote the thesis statement as directed minutes before handing it in and, thereby, passed the assignment. This example demonstrates Lamar's approach and seeming success to writing assignments in the course.

Lamar described approaching his essays in the same way in Professor Williams's course. Lamar recalled "filling in words," and explained "once I hit that 700 [word] point [of the required 1,200 words], I [was] lost and I[was] just trying to add sentences—it would make no sense with the paragraph." Unlike Lamar's previous experiences in high school and developmental English, however, he was not able to find a way to meet with Professor Williams's expectations. This was likely because of Professor Williams's pedagogical approach. Professor Williams explained in his interview that his approach to teaching students how to write was to give them detailed written and oral feedback that highlighted the differences between the expectations detailed in the rubric and what the student turned in. In this way, Professor Williams's feedback and assessment practices were intended to help students develop their ability to more independently meet the expectations of any given writing assignment by considering the expectations of the assignment and practicing writing as process of revision to meet those expectations.

The problem in Lamar's case was that he had not developed in his previous coursework a framework to understand and productively respond to Professor Williams's assessment practices. Lamar approached the essay assignments in Professor Williams's course by "filling in words" for the first formal submissions, and when the essay assignments were returned with a failing grade he interpreted the feedback as telling him what to write—as he had in his previous coursework. For example, Lamar reported that in the feedback on his paper and in face-to-face meetings, Professor Williams regularly asked Lamar "how does this [something Lamar wrote] connect to the [assigned] readings?" Lamar described his approach to revising using this particular feedback:

> I'll add on maybe a sentence or two so I don't completely destroy the whole paragraph… which [the sentences] will be like the same exact thing [I already wrote], but in my head I'll be like "okay, I changed it so that's good."

Lamar had made it to this point in his educational career earning passing grades on writing assignments by making some superficial changes to his essays according to what he believed his teachers were telling him to write. Whether the changes Lamar made to his essays, in fact, met with his teachers' expectations or Lamar was given passing grades for his effort is unclear. Regardless, Lamar's experiences in this regard left him unprepared to interpret Professor Williams's feedback as a question intended to develop a complex synthesis of his own ideas and the ideas of others as detailed in the rubric; rather, Lamar believed that he was being prompted to "add on maybe a sentence or two." In some ways Lamar was right, he was being asked to "add". However, according to the grading rubric, Professor Williams expected Lamar to add meaningful connections between his ideas and those in the readings as well as express those ideas clearly, not simply add sentences onto the end of his paragraphs that said the same exact thing.

Lamar was surprised when the revisions of his first thee essays were returned with the same failing grade. In fact, Professor Williams's expectations for independently revising essays using the feedback was new to Lamar. I asked him if he ever had an experience where adding sentences onto

paragraphs was successful? He replied, "that was only in high school [and] in my [developmental English] class."

As the revisions were graded and returned, Lamar's failure using the approach that had earned passing grades to this point in his academic career left him increasingly frustrated. Despite his frustration, Lamar attended every class, turned in all five essay assignments and the revisions, and incorporated the feedback as best he could. He was hoping that, in the end, Professor Williams would pass him for his effort. However, Lamar's misunderstanding of Professor Williams's expectations of using feedback persisted, and Lamar never wrote an essay that met with the criteria in the rubric. Lamar failed the course.

When I asked Lamar why he thought he earned passing grades on essays in developmental English but could not in Professor Williams's course, he concluded that his developmental English professor "wasn't as strict of what she wants like [Professor Williams]," and that "it's weird because they [the two professors] completely wanted different things." While it is unclear to what extent Lamar's conclusion is accurate, it is clear that in both courses Lamar interpreted the feedback as telling him what to write, and believed that writing what he thought he was told would earn a passing grade on any given writing assignment. Accordingly, Lamar was never able to interpret Professor Williams's feedback as it was intended.

For example, all five essay assignments required Lamar to argue his opinion (position) about his ideas in connection with ideas in the assigned readings. Under the Purpose section of the extensive one-page assignment sheets that Professor Williams handed out for each essay assignment, it explicitly stated this expectation: "You are entering a conversation…, which means you will need to include what other people have written on the topic, as well as what you think." Professor Williams reported in his first interview that Lamar's essays were "very detailed, personal reaction to the reading" and concluded that Lamar "has a misunderstanding about what academic writing is." Accordingly, Professor Williams's feedback, as Lamar reported, focused upon prompting Lamar to make connections between his opinion and the assigned readings.

However, because Lamar's approach to writing essays was to "just… add sentences [that] would make no sense with the paragraph," and Professor Williams was the first teacher to consistently fail him for this approach, Lamar concluded that his main problem was Professor Williams's particular dislike of Lamar adding his opinions. Lamar explained:

> It goes with the teacher, like how they want us to write our essays. I add a lot of my opinion where in [Professor Williams's] class he doesn't like [me] doing that… I just always do that and that's what brings my grade down.

Professor Williams's feedback asking Lamar what the connection to the reading is was intended to help Lamar see that he needed to connect his ideas with those of others, but Lamar's interpretation was that he was not supposed to add his opinion. In this way, Lamar confused a fundamental element of academic writing with what Professor Williams "likes."

Because of Lamar's misinterpretation of Professor Williams's feedback and assessments, he also never interpreted his failing grades as an indication that he needed to do anything differently than filling in words and adding sentences he believed the professor was telling him to add. Instead, he maintained that he needed to figure out exactly what a professor wanted him to write:

> And now I know it's gonna be different for every professor, but I think now it's just what the professor wants, I don't understand exactly what they want so—[the result] is just gonna turn out to a confused student with a bad essay.

From Lamar's perspective, he failed because he could not understand exactly what Professor Williams wanted him to write. His confusion and bad essays resulted from not being able to figure out what sentences to add, which was evidently more easily discernable with his developmental English professor the semester prior (and with his high school English teachers, too).

Lamar's belief that his failure resulted from not figuring out exactly what Professor Williams wanted him to write prevented him from seeing his more fundamental difficulty: that he did not

know how to revise an essay in ways that would enable him to meet the expectations detailed in the rubric (or presumably any college-level writing assignment). Moreover, because Lamar did not see the need for a new approach, he was never able to learn the process of drafting and revising that Professor Williams's assessments were intended to foster.

At the end of the semester, Lamar was no closer to developing a new approach to his coursework. I asked him in the interview what he believed he would have needed to pass the course:

> If me and [Professor Williams] just sat down for a full hour and I would actually type my revision in front of him, as I'm doing what he doesn't want me to do, he'd tell me, and tell me about it, why I'm doing, how I could stop it, and how I could stop doing it within all my essays. As I'm typing, he'd be like "just switch that around."

Lamar believed that he could have passed the course if Professor Williams explained exactly what he did not like and told Lamar how he could stop doing it. Moreover, Lamar assumed that the difference between the essays he was writing and those that would earn passing grades was a matter of specific corrections such as "just switch that around." Professor Williams's pedagogical intent to help students develop the revision practices fundamental to good academic writing was never realized for Lamar.

While Professor Williams's assessment practices were indicative of the assessment practices that helped students develop the ability to independently meet the expectations of college-level writing (as in the case of Sofia detailed below), it did not work for Lamar. Rather, Lamar continued to use the approach that resulted in success in high school and developmental English. He left the course still writing essays by "filling in words," and expecting and wanting the professor to tell him exactly what he needs to write "real quick" to earn a passing grade.

In the same way that Lamar's high school experience left him unprepared to develop an academic essay using a drafting and revising approach that would meet with the expectations detailed in Professor Williams's rubric, his developmental English course left him equally unprepared. That is, neither his high school nor his developmental English course reoriented Lamar to writing as a process of revising in ways valued in higher education. Thus, he was still unprepared to respond productively to Professor Williams's assessments intended to foster meaningful revision.

"The more mistakes you have the better you could improve": Sofia's experience

In contrast to Lamar, Sofia's experiences with assessments in developmental English the semester prior, and in Professor Williams's course, helped her develop the ability to independently (and with growing proficiency) meet Professor Williams's expectations for college-level writing. The development of her abilities in this regard was based upon experiencing assessments as opportunities to learn how to revise in developmental English.

In her urban high school, Sofia's interest in achieving good grades led to frustration when her teachers passed her with what she reported as "low Bs," yet assessed certain parts of her work as "bad," and never provided opportunities for her to revise according to their feedback. Sofia described how in high school she was neither instructed in how to improve upon the skills her teachers assessed as weak, nor given the opportunity to revise so that she could practice those skills for future use.

Sofia discussed her experience with assessments retrospectively and was, therefore, able to identify that teacher feedback "just talking about grammar" or suggesting that she "add a topic" without a chance to revise left her believing that she was a "bad writer." In fact, because Sofia was not given the opportunity to revise her work in high school, she came to understand assessments of her writing as indelible judgments about her ability. She explained:

> I know with certain high schools, when you look over the person's shoulder and you see [their graded essay, students say] "oh, they got a bad grade," or whatever and then the person, they're kind of down on themselves too because now everyone sees they have a bad grade because of all the red marks they have

[on their graded essay].... In high school, we used to always be like, "look at all the mistakes you made. You're not a good writer."

Sofia was one of the students in her high school who understood herself as having "never been a good writer" because all of the red marks she received on her graded essays. In fact, Sofia explained that although her teachers gave her "low Bs" she knew "they weren't strong essays... they weren't passable for college-level." However, in her developmental English course the semester prior, she experienced a fundamental reorientation to assessments and her ability to write. Here is the same interview response without elisions:

> I know with certain high schools, when you look over the person's shoulder and you see [their graded essay, students say] "oh, they got a bad grade," or whatever and then the person, they're kind of down on themselves too because now everyone sees they have a bad grade because of all the red marks they have [on their graded essay]. But I feel like once you get a good teacher, they tell you the more edits you have on there it's better because you can improve your writing, which I got that from [my developmental English professor]. In high school, we used to always be like, "look at all the mistakes you made. You're not a good writer." Here, [at USCC, my developmental English professor] showed us the more mistakes you have the better you could improve. That's how I always see it [now].

Sofia's new understanding of assessments was developed in her developmental English course. This was achieved through an assessment process focused on drafting and revising wherein she was expected to incorporate what she described as "feedback from everyone." Although, she recalled that she and her classmates initially "didn't like getting criticized," Sofia came to understand assessments as providing feedback that highlighted areas in her essays that she needed to improve and opportunities to practice those improvements without penalty.

Importantly, Sofia's experience in developmental English led her to understand that assessments help her to improve her ability to write academic essays. Central to her reorientation was developing an approach to coursework that began with drafting an essay and then revising until it made a clear argument to the reader. Accordingly, when she reached Professor Williams's course, she eagerly engaged in his assessment practices. I asked Sofia how her change in mindset that occurred in developmental English shaped her approach to her coursework in college-level English with Professor Williams:

> I used to think like if you have so much feedback on your paper then it's a bad paper, it's not good. But, now I see it as I do have like a good start, I just need to use what [Professor Smith] said and make it better....Because I remember [my developmental English professor] said, "there's never a perfect paper." So I felt like that [getting feedback from Professor Williams] was the next step into a perfect paper where sometimes I want another revision so I could do it again with the extra edits that [Professor Williams] puts in there.

In one example of using feedback to improve her paper, Sofia recalled reading Professor Williams's feedback stating "if you wanna add this idea in [then you need to] make it fit with the thesis." She recalled, "I had a sentence in there about crime rates in prison, but my essay wasn't on that; I kind of threw in a sentence." She explained how she proceeded:

> So when I got it [the essay] back [with Professor Williams's feedback] I saw that it [the sentence] fit nowhere in the essay or in that paragraph. So... I added it [the idea] to the thesis, [and] I was able to add in a whole new paragraph and it made my essay longer.

As Sofia experienced assessments in developmental and college-level English as a process of considering feedback, revising, and resubmitting a superior essay for a superior grade, she developed her understanding of writing as a process of revision. In this way, Sofia develop her independence as a writer, too. By the end of the semester, she was able to anticipate and satisfy Professor Williams's expectations for college-level writing, earning a grade of B+ on the first formal submission of her third essay. (Sofia elected to revise all of her essays despite relatively high initial grades on her last three.) I asked Sofia how she became a better writer:

> I used to rush through it just to get it over with because I didn't like writing essays. Now, to make myself better I just focus on it and take my time and now it comes out good when I follow all the steps [of the writing

process] and think of [Professor Williams] comments from my previous papers, I think about it on this one and make sure all my ideas are together and they're not everywhere, basically. They're all organized.

To the extent that Sofia has learned through the assessment practices of her developmental English professor and Professor Williams to focus, take her time, follow all the steps of a writing process, and understands that all of her ideas should be together and organized, she has developed a high level of competency in academic writing. Her competency resulted from assessments in developmental English that avoided telling her what to write and/or judging her ability; instead, assessments asked her to practice revision steps that generally improve writing. Through these assessment experiences, Sofia adopted these steps as matter of practice in her coursework, and by the end of the semester required little help to meet Professor Williams's expectations.

Importantly, because Sofia's experience with assessments in high school never demonstrated steps, and always resulted in "low Bs" with "red marks" regardless of her interest in earning a higher grade, she concluded that she was a "bad writer" who did not understand English. However, now that Sofia has been assessed in ways that have taught her how to improve her writing using a revision process to meet the expectations of her professors, she has changed her mind. She reported in the interview: "Now that I understand it [English], I like it."

Discussion

Each student's interpretation of Professor Williams's pedagogy shaped their interactions with Professor Williams's assessment practices. In Lamar's case, previous assessment experiences never helped him understand feedback as anything other than "adding sentences;" Thus, this was his approach to revisions in Professor Williams's course. In contrast, Sofia's previous assessment experiences fundamentally reoriented her to the purpose of assessments, preparing her to more productively engage Professor Williams's pedagogy. Indeed, the assessment practices enacted in both her developmental and college-level English courses developed her understanding of writing as a process of revising in ways valued in higher education, and, thus, her ability to independently write college-level essays.

The findings suggest at least two major implications for theory and practice. First, the findings provide a detailed portrait of the ways students' previous learning experiences can have a powerful impact upon how they interpret and engage the pedagogy enacted in a course. Professor Williams enacted what might be called an ideal constructivist pedagogy that helped students develop revision skills by presenting problems (i.e., feedback) to be solved and opportunities to practice solving those problems (i.e., revisions) (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). That is, Professor Williams engaged both students in a constructive process focused upon the problem of conveying meaning through their writing, and revisions required students to build upon and/or rethink their understandings of writing in order to meet the demands of the assignments. In this way, the constructive process of learning required the students to integrate the knowledge they already possessed (writing an essay) and the new knowledge they were being taught (how to revise to meet expectations of college-level writing) in order to think and understand differently. For Sofia, consecutive semesters of this pedagogy changed the way she understood writing assessments and, in turn, shaped deep and meaningful learning about writing as a process of revision. However, Lamar was not able to construct the knowledge of a revision process despite the ideal pedagogy. Lamar continued to interpret Professor Williams's pedagogy through his previous experiences with writing assignments in high school and developmental English.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that the ideal constructivist pedagogy can inadvertently rest upon the assumption that students know what they do not know. This seems particularly true for developmental English students who have not been prepared to think and write in ways valued in higher education. To the extent that a professor's pedagogical intent is to allow students to arrive at their own understanding without explicitly telling them key information needed to meet the

professor's expectations, students might struggle to arrive at the understandings necessary to pass their courses. Or worse, students can easily get frustrated and quit before they figure it out for themselves.

Ramsden (2003) asserts that a professor's teaching shapes how students learn (either surface or deep), and that author concluded that effective teaching ought to be conceived of as "making [deep] learning possible" (p. 110). Accordingly, the content to be taught is secondary to understanding any challenges students might have in learning that content. Because learning must engage and build upon students' previous knowledge, effective teaching is predicated upon the idea that all teaching is context specific. Context specific teaching requires the professor to research the students' understandings in order to identify the problems students are having with learning ("considering the needs of a particular group of students") and then selecting content and devising approaches that engage these particular students by solving the problems they face (Ramsden, 2003, p. 131).

The findings of the present study suggest that some students fail courses, in part, because they cannot engage the enacted pedagogy. Accordingly, professors—especially those who teach students who were deemed underprepared—should work to understand how students interpret and interact with the enacted pedagogy in order to provide students the scaffolding necessary to access it. This is not easy; if it were, Professor Williams would have likely identified that Lamar's failure on early essays was the result of misunderstanding what revision meant and intervened to provide more explicit instruction in this regard. Regardless, professors might consider coupling good course design and pedagogy with a high sensitivity to students' interactions with the course content and assessments.

Second, and more practically, the findings suggest that instead of focusing students' efforts upon rote drills—as many developmental English courses do (see for example Grubb, 2013)—or telling students what to write, developmental English professors need to provide students (a) explicit instruction on how to write, (b) multiple opportunities to practice, and (c) formative assessments that help students understand the expectations of college-level writing. Lamar's experience demonstrates that simply moving from rote drills to requiring students to write essays is not enough. For Lamar, writing essays in developmental English without developing an understanding of how to communicate to others in ways valued in higher education was deleterious. In contrast, Sofia's developmental English course focused her upon writing as a social process whereby everyone gave feedback and she was expected to incorporate that feedback to help others understand better what she was trying to say. Learning that such a process is an opportunity to develop her ideas and clarity helped her make sense of English as a subject. And such understanding set the stage to successfully engage in Professor Williams's assessment practices, and presumably those of future professors. In this way, the findings affirm a growing body of literature that suggests developmental English professors must develop courses that avoid what Grubb (2013) referred to as "remedial pedagogy." Instead, they should provide meaningful opportunities for students to practice college-level literacies (e.g., Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2013; Hillocks, 1999; MacArthur & Philippakos, 2013; Perun, 2015).

To this end, the findings suggest that current policy trends, including compression and mainstreaming (Edgecombe, 2011), might be misguided for at least two reasons. First, mainstreaming and/or compression policies that are aimed at fixing the problem of developmental education largely ignore how valuable these courses can be to students who need to develop key skills necessary for success in college (Bahr, 2008, 2010; Bailey et al., 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). Even though most students never make it to a college-level course, the learning opportunity in developmental education seems to be central to helping students pass their college-level course at the same rate as students deemed prepared (e.g., Bailey et al., 2010). Therefore, developmental education courses that help students develop the academic skills necessary for success in college are an important component of the community college academic track and should not be eliminated.

Instead, developing developmental courses focused on helping students practice literacy skills valued in higher education and standardizing corresponding curricula and student-centered pedagogies might prove more impactful policy interventions.

Funding

Notes on contributor

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