

Building Trust, Confidence, and Relationships From Afar: Teaching Web-Based Developmental Writing in a Pandemic

Charles Park

Berkshire Community College

Introduction

The challenges of teaching in a pandemic have forced instructors and institutions of higher learning to revisit issues of quality, equity, and engagement in relation to online education. Once the scramble to “pivot” to remote learning died down and as the spring semester ended, Berkshire Community College—a small, rural institution located in Western Massachusetts—began thinking about the fall semester. In particular, the members of the English department focused on pedagogical practices for delivering developmental writing in online and hybrid (sometimes called “blended”) formats. Although the department has several faculty who have experience teaching online and hybrid sections of college-level composition and literature courses, we have never offered developmental writing fully online. One rationale for this decision is the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of the way the English department has approached developmental writing over the past four years, during which time it was remodeled from a stand-alone to a corequisite format. This rationale includes the objective of developmental writing, which is to help underprepared students for college-level work. Critical thinking and critical writing skills fall into this objective and are generally modeled and practiced in class. The move towards online and hybrid modalities has upended the practices that have made developmental writing successful and has forced the English department to rethink its philosophical approach to it. This report will thus discuss the difficulties of offering web-based corequisite developmental writing, especially in terms of engagement and modeling critical thinking, as well as new opportunities that moving online brings as we consider the role of digital technology in developmental writing.

Developmental Writing and Digital Technology

Before the events of this spring forced all classes to go online, developmental writing at Berkshire Community College was always offered fully in person, with occasional hybrid sections and none that were fully online. This was a deliberate decision based on the needs of developmental students and the characteristics of a web-based framework, which seemed incompatible with each other. Although many of the face-to-face sections were heavily web-enhanced, with assignments and activities available via the college’s learning management system (LMS), classroom time was often devoted to helping students navigate the LMS. A distinction should be made here between web-enhanced and web-based: *web-enhanced* is a course that meets face-to-face but has an accompanying LMS where the syllabus, assignments, readings, and other activities are posted or made available; *web-based* is a course where half or more of the course content, including lectures and activities, is available

through the LMS. Online and hybrid courses represent web-based modes of instruction and presume a level of competence with digital technology and reliable access to the internet.

Aside from the issue of equity of access, a further consideration was that, although research on online pedagogy has been coming into maturity over the last two decades, there has been a dearth of research looking at online developmental writing. Stine (2010a) noted this ten years ago and called for more teachers and students of developmental writing to participate in the “online learning debate” (p. 141). Despite this call, research into online developmental writing has remained scant. This is most likely the result of a confluence of factors that have generally limited the number of online developmental writing courses being offered, including lack of resources or access to technology and decision-makers’ skepticism about their effectiveness (Natow et al., 2020). Again, there is a general perception that online pedagogical practices are ill-suited to meet the needs of developmental writers, who tend to have weaker reading and writing skills, which are usually the foundation for web-based course design (Stine, 2010b). Rather than building on oral and aural skills, which are the cornerstone of face-to-face developmental courses, students are asked to rely heavily on these other skills that they already feel insecure about.

Underscoring this point is research showing that community college students seeking out online classes “were more likely to be academically prepared at entry, from higher income neighborhoods, and fluent in English [and] also more likely to be balancing multiple life demands (e.g., to be 25 or older, to have dependents, or to be employed full time) and to be White” (Jaggars et al., 2013, p.1). Although many of the students taking developmental writing at Berkshire Community College may be balancing work and family, and many of them are non-traditional in age, they are generally less academically prepared and are lower income and/or identify as a racial minority, which means that students taking developmental writing are not generally students who seek out online course offerings. When online developmental writing courses are offered, students across the board are far more likely to fail or withdraw from those courses than face-to-face courses, with those taking online first-year composition courses nearly twice as likely to fail or withdraw and those taking online developmental English classes more than twice as likely to fail or withdraw than those taking face-to-face sections of those classes (Jaggars et al., 2013; McKinney et al., 2019).

Over the last two decades, additional research, examining various academic contexts, has found similar results that suggest students who take sections online, compared to those who take them face-to-face, are more likely to do worse on tests, receive a lower final grade, eventually drop out, and generally be affected negatively in their academic progress (Apert et al., 2016; Bettinger et al., 2017; Coates et al., 2004; Figlio et al., 2013; Huntington-Klein et al., 2017). Although the methodologies and the target demographics vary, the results of these studies are largely discouraging. There is, however, a glimmer of hope offered by one study of students at Washington state community colleges, which showed that black and Latinx students, those with limited English proficiency, and veterans are more likely to complete their degrees after having taken an online course (Huntington-Klein et al., 2017). This is in line with an earlier study suggesting that although students taking developmental writing online are more likely to withdraw than those taking it face-to-face, those actually completing the online sections did as well or better than those taking face-to-face sections (Carpenter et al., 2004). Given these studies, perhaps “the students who choose to take online courses are not the same students who get the most from them” (Huntington-Klein et al.,

2017, p. 246). Unfortunately, there has not been sustained research into web-based developmental writing to be able to draw any conclusions about its efficacy.

Accelerated Learning Program and Developing Critical Skills

This lack of data on the effectiveness of web-based developmental writing, and the popular perception of who chooses and succeeds in web-based courses, played a role in the way the English department at Berkshire Community College redesigned its developmental writing course. Between 2016 and 2017, the department decided to revamp the course, changing it from a standalone 4-credit prerequisite to a 3-credit corequisite course. Following the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) model developed at the Community College of Baltimore County, the English department placed students needing remediation in the newly developed College Writing Practices (ENG 090) concurrently with Composition I (ENG 101), the first-semester college writing course. This change was prompted by the college's data that showed a low number of students went on to complete ENG 101 after having taken developmental writing. The attractiveness of the ALP model was that students would start in a credit-bearing composition course with a second class to help them navigate and complete it. ENG 101 would have a cap of 22 students, 11 of whom would be college-ready and 11 who would have tested into developmental writing. Those who were developmental would take ENG 101 with those who were college-ready but then attend ENG 090 right after with the same instructor. ENG 090 would spend the class period going over ENG 101, discussing assignments, gaining additional time to work on and workshop their essays, and otherwise receive additional instruction, including basic college-readiness skills. In the three years since we made the switch, ALP has had a positive effect in the number of developmental-level students who complete ENG 101. Our results have been in line with other findings on the positive correlation between ALP and college success (Adams et al., 2009; Barhoum, 2018; Cho et al., 2012; Vandal, 2014).

An important component of ENG 090 is the classroom time and interaction that each student has with the faculty and their peers. This is an intentional course design since a student's immediate interaction with their ten classmates and with the instructor is an important facet of achieving the objectives of the course. The time in the classroom, then, is not meant to be a crutch or a tutorial session, or simply to push students through ENG 101. Rather, since the course serves as an extension of ENG 101 and focuses on the development of skills that are integral to success as college students, time in the classroom is used to work through the difficulties of critical thinking and writing in a supportive, safe, and collaborative environment. In other words, the students utilize the oral, aural, and visual skills that developmental students tend to feel comfortable with as the foundation for building up those they feel insecure about. One of these skills is the scaffolding of essay writing to underscore the fact that writing is a process. This involves modeling the various steps of the writing process and providing time for students to critique and learn from one another. Another aspect is developing non-cognitive skills, such as perseverance and overall confidence as college students, which is further reinforced through student-to-student interactions. Additionally, critical thinking—from interpreting the assignment to offering peer-review critique to composing logical, thesis-driven essays—is a major part of the objectives of ENG 090.

In the context of ENG 090, critical thinking is understood within the Paul-Elder Critical Thinking Framework, which defines it as “the art of analyzing and evaluating

thinking with a view to improving it" (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 2). The process by which critical thinking is developed is embedded in ENG 101 and applied more fully in the second-semester composition course, ENG 102. More precisely, over the two-semester composition sequence, students are shown how to apply intellectual standards (clarity, precision, accuracy, significance, relevance, completeness, logicalness, fairness, breadth, depth) to elements of reasoning (purpose, inferences, questions, concepts, points of view, implications, information, assumptions) to develop intellectual traits (intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, intellectual autonomy, confidence in reasoning, intellectual integrity, intellectual empathy, intellectual courage, fairmindedness) that are critical to college-level coursework (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 19). The role of ENG 090 is to help students practice the intellectual standards and apply them to their ENG 101 assignments with the guidance of their instructor and the support of their small group of similarly situated classmates. As Miller (2002) argued, students in developmental writing classes do not always recognize or trust their capacity for critical thinking. Thus, it is imperative that they are shown, in an environment that is safe and where they know that they will not be "hurt" for making mistakes, "that they already have the inherent ability to think critically and how the process can work for them" (p. 104).

In other words, students in developmental writing must trust their instructor and classmates enough so that they feel that they have a safety net for when their thinking is challenged. Without this trust, it is often difficult for students who have been penalized for being "wrong" in the past to analyze or evaluate their thinking critically. For students entering college with uncertainty regarding their academic abilities, the interaction with faculty and other students to create this trust and confidence is an integral part of ENG 090 as well as their continued academic success (Cox, 2009).

The benefit and appeal of ALP, in addition to its building of trust and confidence, is that composition and critical thinking skills are developed while doing college-level work. The instructor can immediately tie the work done in ENG 090 to ENG 101, thereby demonstrating the applicability of the skills. This immediate connection has been important because of the confidence the students gain from their accomplishments but also because they know that their efforts work directly toward attaining college credit. Pacello (2019) made the case that transparency in teaching developmental writing, especially the purpose for each assignment, helps students transfer their skills to future college-level writing. This transparency is built into ALP because the assignments in ENG 090 directly supplement the essays they are writing in ENG 101 in ways that are immediately obvious. Moreover, because ENG 090 meets directly after ENG 101, students and the instructor can revisit an assignment or a discussion that they had in ENG 101, further establishing relevancy and immediacy.

This symbiotic relationship also creates a rigor to developmental writing that is directly applicable to college-level writing. This rigor and the students' success correlates generally to stronger retention and credit accrual (Jaggers et al., 2015). But this rigor is buttressed by interpersonal relationships, as mentioned above, that create a safe space for students to ask questions, seek help, and make mistakes. This sense of trust and safety that students develop in ENG 090 helps to establish and maintain a positive self-esteem that is necessary for developmental students to succeed both short- and long-term (Miller, 2002; Smittle, 2003). In short, ENG 090 is designed to imbue students with a sense of trust and confidence built on relationships with their instructor and classmates.

Teaching Developmental Writing in a Pandemic

As we looked toward fall 2020 and considered how we would navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic, the English department decided to make most classes either fully online or hybrid, with those choosing the latter having the option of making the in-class component actually face-to-face or virtually synchronous via Zoom or other video conferencing apps. This decision meant moving beyond a web-enhanced format to more robust web-based formats. For the fall semester, five sections of ENG 090 were scheduled, of which two were to be delivered fully online, two as hybrid that met synchronously online once a week (hybrid-virtual), and one as hybrid with a 75-minute face-to-face class period once a week rather than the traditional 75 minutes twice a week (hybrid-actual). The affiliated ENG 101 courses were fully online for the two online ENG 090s, while one of the hybrid-virtual ENG 090s was paired with a fully online ENG 101 and the other with a hybrid-virtual ENG 101. Finally, the hybrid-actual section was paired with an ENG 101 that was also hybrid-actual and met for 75 minutes before the ENG 090. (By the time the semester started, however, two sections of ENG 090—one which was fully online and one which was hybrid-virtual—were canceled due to low enrollment.) As we considered these various modalities and combinations, numerous questions were raised internally regarding the logistics and efficacy of these courses. First and foremost was the effect that the modes of delivery would have on the basic objectives of ENG 090. The fact that it has always been scheduled to meet immediately after ENG 101, and with the classroom interactions a major component of developing the necessary skills, meant that the way we thought about ENG 090 had to shift.

A leading consideration was the level of student engagement and their comfort level in taking a web-based class without the safety net of in-person class periods. Again, one of the biggest concerns leading into a web-based ENG 090 was that the structure of web-based learning did not generally play to the strengths of students requiring developmental writing. The fact that developmental students feel insecure about their reading and writing skills meant that they would have to be reassured of their abilities rather early in the semester. Reassurance has been an important part of developmental writing because students come in with self-doubt and insecurities about their writing abilities. These students already know that they had been placed into an additional section of composition, which only confirms their insecurities. In a traditional, face-to-face section, self-doubt and insecurities are addressed by the instructor on the first day and throughout the semester. Usually, after the first few weeks, students have “bought in” to ENG 090, especially as they see their progress in ENG 101, and students also start to encourage each other as the semester progresses.

In a web-based setting, however, the ability of the instructor to provide early and continued reassurances, as well as the abilities of students to encourage one another, must hurdle the challenges of engagement that online education presents. Certainly, social interaction is an important factor in student success (Jaggars & Xu, 2016) and there are several ways to foster positive interaction and engagement (Meyer, 2014). Unsurprisingly, the more a student participates within the course, the more critically engaged they are as well (Ouyang & Chang, 2019). For these reasons, it was important that effective strategies for interaction and engagement were developed in designing the ENG 090. Fortunately, students’ understanding of the elements that foster effective online learning is not all that different from what makes effective face-to-face learning. Young (2006) defined “effectiveness” in online teaching as “adapting to student needs, providing meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering

a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning” (p. 73). This definition of an “effective online teacher” is not any different from what one would expect from an “effective teacher,” regardless of the modality. The key factor, then, is that learning must be a collaboration between the instructor and the student, and that online learning must not be an independent endeavor (Young, 2006).

This point needs to be kept in mind since students in online classes are more likely to fail or withdraw than those in face-to-face classes, making effective engagement more crucial in developmental writing than in college-level courses. Also worth noting is that, as mentioned above, black and Latinx students, those with limited English proficiency, and veterans may be more likely to complete their degrees after having taken an online course (Huntington-Klein et al., 2017). The fact that so many of my colleagues have selected some form of web-based format means that students who have not generally self-selected for web-based courses have had limited options. If Huntington-Klein et al.’s (2017) premise is correct, then it could be that students who would not have otherwise selected web-based sections may end up benefitting more than previously thought. The numerous studies that have considered the drawbacks of web-based education for “at-risk” students have been one of the reasons why we have never offered ENG 090 online. This is not to say that developmental writing students cannot succeed in a web-based class; rather, this is an opportunity to rethink our approach to ENG 090 when offering it in a web-based framework.

This returns us to the importance of teacher-student interaction as a crucial element for student success. In ENG 090—and, to a lesser degree, ENG 101—this relationship is even more important. First, students need to know that ENG 090 is not a separate course but that it is a companion course to ENG 101. This association is easy to establish in face-to-face settings where ENG 090 meets immediately after ENG 101 and the connection between the two courses is rather self-evident. Without the immediacy of the face-to-face meetings, this connection may be lost or more difficult to establish. It requires additional work by the faculty to underscore the link between the two courses when they are both fully online and to be much more explicit about the ways the assignments in ENG 090 buttress the assignments in ENG 101.

Further, modelling noncognitive and critical thinking skills for students must be done even more methodically than in the past. There is a limited number of studies suggesting that web-based developmental courses can foster community and critical thinking, especially through chat and discussion boards in the LMS (Burgess, 2009). Still, that critical thinking must be developed through tools such as chat and discussion boards means that the instructor must be transparent in what they are trying to accomplish and to let students know when they are demonstrating these skills, employing what Juzwiak and Tiernan (2009) called “pedagogies of visibility.” Speaking of the “Full E-mersion” approach to developmental writing at Glendale Community College in California, where instruction is infused “with as much technology as possible,” the authors explained that “transparency involves not only the instruction content but the instructor’s role and rationale as well, representing a full disclosure of the instructional process” (p. 79–80). This pedagogical transparency benefits not only students but also the instructor since the instructor must understand exactly what they are doing and why. When modelling critical thinking or engaging in activities that foster meta-cognitive skills, Paul and Elder’s “art of analyzing and evaluating thinking,” the instructor must be explicit about what they are asking the student to do and why.

The Future Potential for Web-Based Developmental Writing

With the present focus on distance learning, courses that were traditionally discouraged from being web-based are having to be rethought. For my English department, ENG 090 is one that has received extensive consideration. The unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic, though, may provide an unintended opportunity to rethink what we know (or what we think we know) about the relationship between developmental writing and online education, especially as we consider the role of technology in helping students succeed academically. As Jonaitis (2012) reminded us, teaching developmental writing—thereby providing education to underprepared or underserved students—is a “political act” and “the various uses (or non-uses) of computer-mediated technologies with basic writing are also political acts, each asserting claims about what basic writers can or cannot do” (p. 40). Moreover, as Carpenter et al. (2004) suggested, not providing web-based developmental writing may disadvantage those who need it to start their academic career but are unable to take it when it is offered face-to-face because of the numerous demands on their time that they are juggling. Although these points were made a decade or more ago, Jonaitis (2012) and Carpenter et al.’s (2004) fundamental premises are no less true today for many community college students.

Consequently, approaches to developmental writing this fall have had to focus on its purposes and objectives and on leveraging what our students are capable of, while being cognizant of what aspects they would need help with. This effort has been, in effect, a high-wire act that necessitated careful planning, but one that has also required modifications and changes as the semester has progressed. Given that we are only midway through the semester, it is too early to tell how well our planning and modifications have worked. If done well, these web-based sections may provide new data that can help us change the way we think about developmental students, online education, and, for two-year colleges, the further democratization of education for those who are most in need but are least prepared.

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