TEN SIMPLE TIPS FOR TEACHING UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT
Some students who enter college may be "underprepared" to compete at the college level. Because of less competitive entry requirements, many of these students may be attracted to minority serving institutions (MSI's) and community colleges. The growing number of underprepared students is well documented in the literature (Sheree, Wilson, & Dole, 2014; Aronowitz, 2011; Wilson, 2010; Dobell, 2006). Consequently, college faculty, particularly those who teach at minority serving institutions (MSI's) and community colleges may be experiencing increased numbers of students who simply do not possess basic skills in reading and mathematics appropriate for college level success. The result is that these students end up performing on a "learning curve" or a compromised rate of performance which may prevent progress necessary to graduate and/or compete in job markets available to college educated students. Additionally, professors and instructors are forced to include additional material in their lectures to try to "catch these students up" to the point of college-ready students. This article is written to provide tips to teaching faculty who encounter "underprepared" students.

INTRODUCTION

If a student is unable to complete college level work adequately, but has been admitted to college, teaching faculty are forced to teach these students utilizing a "learning curve." According to MerriamWebster.com, a "learning curve" is "a person's progress in gaining experience or new skills." Students that have a very steep learning curve often have a large amount of information, content, and material that must be learned quickly in order to perform successfully in the college classroom. These are the same skills that are needed to pass certification/licensure criteria and tests. These students are referred to as "underprepared" college students. Community colleges and minority serving institutions (MSI's) often serve a high number of "underprepared" students, who may also be non traditional students, parents and working adults seeking a higher education (Bay, 2010; Maxwell, 2010; Wilson, 2010).

When underprepared students enter college, they are already behind their college-ready peers. The underprepared student must compensate for their learning curve by quickly gaining both pre-college skills and new college level information at the same time, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage to their better prepared peers. Underprepared students spend a great amount of time in their college years trying to fill in the missing gaps and "catch up" with their peers. These students often have extensive difficulty in understanding important terms and concepts that are usually learned prior to college years. Additionally, these students are tasked with a constantly more demanding environment if they are lucky enough to progress past the initial year or two in college. Understandably, these students are also at higher risk of lower performance and/or eventual "drop out."

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

While instructional faculty may be fully prepared to convey their particular subject matter to typical college students, they may find themselves floundering when they encounter underprepared students in their classes. They find themselves tasked with providing these students with foundational or basic information that was designed to prepare them for college level work. Many new and even, sometimes seasoned professors have the expectation that students they encounter in their classes possess a minimum level of knowledge and understanding upon entering college/university settings. By providing instructional faculty with simple tips to assist them in working with underprepared students, they will have the tools to help these students not only perform better in their classes, but be successful in the college environment. In order to work with these students successfully, instructional faculty may find it helpful to provide these students with the following:

#1 Definitions, Definitions, and More Definitions. Definitions make the context/material more distinct or clear. According to Frey (2010) and Huntley (2006), it is critical to include reading skills and comprehension instruction with lecture materials. This is because in college, reading is not only the basis of how much information is learned but additionally, college level reading is more complicated than high school reading. By including basic definitions for even the simplest of terms, instructors will help students build upon their base or foundational knowledge while building skills specifically targeted by the course. Student who are able to "work at" unlocking meaning by calling upon sophisticated reading comprehension skills and strategies, regardless of their background are more likely to succeed in college core courses (Manzo, 2006). Textbooks, journal articles, and other written materials often use difficult to understand jargon which may be challenging to even college-prepared students, and be "impossible" for underprepared students to master. By recognizing and "breaking down" the jargon, instructors are able to assist the underprepared student by making reading material more relatable to the student. Even though textbooks may provide highlighting of key terms within each chapter, if instructional faculty are able to identify and target culturally biased terminology or terminology that is not familiar to students, and provide alternative terminology that they are able to readily relate to, the disadvantage of the learning curve that these students posses will be addressed. Instructors can pull students in on defining these key words by creating an assignment or activity for students where they actually are tasked with defining terms in ways that they can better understand.

#2 Expanded Outlines, PowerPoints, and Notes. Instructional faculty attempt to increase learning by incorporating a variety of technologies in their instructions, however, for many learning tasks, traditional teaching tools such as lecture, textbooks, and instructor interaction have been found to be more effective, especially for the underprepared student (Henriques & Kusse, 2011). Typically, traditional PowerPoint slides are incorporated into class with limited words, few sentences, and bulleted phrases. When working with the underprepared student, it may be useful to provide more extensive notes with PowerPoint presentations/slides. As a number of underprepared students are also students who may be older, less economically advantaged, or may not have had access to "the latest" technological advances, the incorporation of more traditional assists such as class notes, outlines, and handouts may be giving students ways of leaning that they are more comfortable with, rather than using "cutting edge" new technologically based methods. For some of those students, self-taken class notes, PowerPoints, outlines, and handouts may be the most valuable instructional materials needed for understanding.

#3 Assessments over Fewer Chapters. Many times when teaching students with a learning curve that are underprepared for college, assessments can be given more frequently and in alternative formats, rather than traditional "high stress producing" paper and pencil tests. Assessments can be given to classes in the form of presentations, assignments, and even games. Additionally, using these types of assessments allows for the use of whole class evaluation to asses students' understanding, although the instructor is tasked with paying closer attention to who is responding and making sure that responses are equitably provided. Even if paper and pencil tests (which may be administered electronically or via computer) are given, they may be given more frequently and cover less material than usual. This will reduce the chances of students getting overwhelmed by having to learn an abundance of information at a given time. By giving frequent tests and assessments, students are also less likely to procrastinate with class tasks and studying (Tincotti, 2010).

#4 Allow Retakes on Test. Test anxiety is a common problem among test takers and especially among underprepared students. Students that are underprepared for college may experience lower confidence levels or self-efficacy skills than college-ready students (Navarro, 2012). If instructors are able to remove initial fears by providing tests where students know what's expected, students are able to perform at higher levels, especially if they are able to count on retest opportunities. Instructors may offer retakes on tests for students who have difficulty with testing and also incorporate some type of remedial activity as a way of reteaching skills (Tincotti, 2010).

#5 Allow Resubmission of Assignment. When students perform unsatisfactory on an assignment(s), it may serve the student well to have a second chance to resubmit the work (Tincotti, 2010). Underprepared college students may be confused or unclear about the task requirements or directions for an assignment. These students may be hesitant to ask questions for clarity for fear of exposing their lack of skills. Therefore, they guess and

assume that they are following guidelines, instructions and meeting the criteria of the assignment. If the student is "wrong in their assumption," the assignment will be wrong. The student may be very capable of providing satisfactory work but due to miscommunication or misinterpretation of instructions and guidelines, students perform at a lower level. Once an assignment(s) is submitted and the professor recognizes that the students are clearly mistaken regarding instructions and guidelines, simply providing an opportunity to resubmit assignments with the new understanding and clarity will lead to increased student performance and outcomes.

#6 Allow Flexibility in Time. Time needed to ensure that individual learning needs are addressed will vary greatly in typical classroom settings (Coleman, 2005). For underprepared students in college classrooms, the variability of time needed to complete assignments may be significantly increased: with some assignments being easily conquered, and others requiring more time and attention. With more difficult assignments, note that students may approach tasks with some hesitancy, or even try to avoid completing required tasks. Additionally, task completion may be accompanied with some anxiety or distress. Distress hinders clear thinking, judgement, and performance. This along with time pressures of completing tasks within the confines of class time may lead to poorer student performance, slower completion time, and even result in some students giving up all together. By allowing students to work at their own pace and readiness, without the fear of completing tasks within the confines of class time, may result in a richer learning experience for students. Working at their own pace will allow students to complete tasks when their fears and emotions are not so heightened due to strict deadlines. In a more relaxed environment, students, especially those who are underprepared may relax and perform significantly better on assignments.

#7 Cross-Reference Partnered/Group Activities. By allowing time and opportunities for collaborative group work, underprepared students may be able to access knowledge that could otherwise be missed without the benefit of feedback of peers. Collaborative learning has proven to be an effective and preferred method of student learning and being actively engaged in the classroom (Freeman & Wash, 2013). Cross-reference partnered or group activities allow students the opportunity to teach one another what they have learned and understand (Freeman & Wash, 2013). Collaborative learning activities also help support the development and enhancement of critical thinking skills through debate, contrast and comparison of peer responses and explanations. Students have opportunity to probe for deeper understanding of difficult or confusing concepts. During these cross-reference group activities, students are forced to help and teach peers how to solve problems, perform calculations, analyze, and evaluate (McClenney & Peterson, 2006). Additionally, through this process, students are able to share and compare information on their own terms in their own time, which can help students retain new knowledge.

#8 Study Guides and Assignments. The creation and use of study guides can be counterproductive for underprepared students if the answers and/or responses are inaccurate. By incorporating self checking through cross class collaboration and instructor input, the accuracy of study guides used to prepare for assessments can be enhanced. This will result in higher success on assignment and test performance. Encouraging the use of questions and short answers in study guide development can also make information more accessible for the underprepared student. As with other student developed study materials, all information should be checked for accuracy (Tincotti, 2010; Pilotti, Chodorow, & Petrov, 2009).

#9 Monitor and Review Tests and Assessments. Instructors who work with underprepared college students should be careful to incorporate the review of these materials often to assure that they are not using and re-using materials that are confusing, misleading, or contain "difficult to understand" language. This problem may exists with instructor prepared materials as well as those that are prepackaged and supplied by textbooks publishers as supplementary materials. By reviewing not only how students perform on tests, but also looking at patterns of items missed by groups of students, instructors are able to detect weaknesses in their instruction, test construction and student understanding. This type of review also allows instructors to monitor tests for items that may be included but was not covered in class. With today's technology there are many programs that offer quick, convenient item analysis of correct vs incorrect responses. Test items that are flagged to have a high rate of failure should either be modified for clarity or removed completely from the test (Gajjar, Sharma, Kumar, &

Rana, 2014). If there is a significant pattern of incorrect responses within an assignment or test, students should not be penalized.

#10. Simply "Show that you Care." When instructional faculty display genuine caring and concern for students, a higher level of commitment is conveyed to students, which can result in increased student effort. In college classrooms, as in all learning environments, instructors may be seen by students as "parent figures" and as such, students may strive to "perform to please" and to earn higher grades. As "loco parentis," it is our duty and responsibility to use that position to the students' advantage: praising and rewarding them when appropriate to do so, not only as reward, but also as reinforcement to boost moral and self esteem. Underprepared college students may enter the classroom environment with lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy (Navarro, 2012). Instructors must encourage students through positive motivation and high expectations to support successful academic experience for all students in their classes, but most especially, this kind of support can be beneficial for the underprepared student.

CONCLUSIONS

These "ten tips" for working with underprepared students are simple, yet easily implemented methods that can enhance the experience of underprepared students in college classrooms. As college level instructors, it is our job to assure that all students have maximized opportunities for success, even when they arrive "not quite ready" to tackle learning in ways that we might expect. When we work with underprepared students, we may have to meet students where they are rather than just "half-way" to assure their success in our classes. Our job, after all is to teach.

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