Junior College Reading Problems

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READING PROGRAMS

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Junior or community college reading programs are one of the areas most open for innovation. The two year college itself is still a relatively new concept and reading programs designed to fit the still evolving function of these schools offer the reading specialist both freedom and frustrations. To date, I have taught reading courses at a junior college which was affiliated with a university and at a community college with an open door policy. In the first instance, the courses were offered through the continuing education department and dealt largely with marginal admittance students. Presently I am within the English department and the reading courses are credit courses, some of which carry transfer credit to local universities. At this point, there are probably many more questions than answers. In this article, I would like to discuss these questions and perhaps this will lead to an exchange of ideas from other reading specialists who may have solutions. Particularly at this level, it is easy to become isolated from dialogue with other reading personnel. What my questions may serve to do is offer an outline of topics to which you may want to respond.

1. Why do students enroll in your courses?

    It may be said that if the course is attractive to students they will voluntarily enroll for a non-credit self improvement course. Junior and community college students, however, often have twenty or thirty hour jobs and limited funds. Paying registration fees for hours that will not count toward their degree is not appealing. Particularly the two year terminal student may be very concerned about the time required to complete the degree. Some schools have a drop-in tutoring system. This works very well at resident campuses but has problems in a community college. Students often spend every free hour on a job. They do not have the extra time to seek help. Sometimes the marginal students are required to enroll in the courses. If the course is non credit and the student does not feel he needs the work, motivation becomes a problem. One alternative is to establish the course as a credit offering which counts toward his degree requirements.

2. Should reading courses be given credit status and be considered as an elective which will fulfill degree requirements?

If one agrees with Mortimer Adler in *How to Read a Book* that the ability to read and think has no upper level, then one would think that a reading course would be a valuable place for anyone to improve his learning skills. It offers two unique skills that are not often dealt with in other courses: the process of reading to learn and the use of resources. Most other courses are content oriented rather than process oriented, and the student is not introduced to resources that are available to continue learning after the degree is granted.

It has been said that required courses and credit regulations have done much to perpetuate bad teaching and stifle the student's initiative. However, token support for reading courses is displayed by administrators who place the reading courses on non credit basis in the midst of a seeming myriad of required credit courses the student must complete. Reading courses at this level also attract and should serve community members who are not seeking a degree. A non credit course would be preferred for these students.

3. How do you find guidelines for purchasing equipment and texts?

The materials in this area are being produced at a rapid rate. The instructor at this level must appeal to age ranges from 17 to 60 and reading levels from fifth to fourteenth. With a limited budget, what materials and texts would be best? Elementary and secondary reading teachers have established some vehicles for sharing ideas and receiving reviews for materials. The college level personnel have only limited ways to find information on materials or techniques.

4. How does the reading specialist establish connections with other faculty members?

Rapport with other faculty and knowledge of their teaching style and texts are two essentials if the reading instructor is aiding the students to deal with the concepts and materials that are actually being presented to him. Part-time reading instructors or ones that are solely responsible for maintaining a laboratory have difficulty finding time to make these contacts. The reading instructor as well as the reading program may become separate and isolated.

5. What are practical methods of evaluation and accountability?

The legislature is rapidly establishing accountability measures for community college faculty. It is more difficult to argue with their measures when accountability guidelines have not already been

established by the schools themselves. Restricting a reading instructor to a certain number of credit hours inhibits him/her from establishing drop-in referral systems or having the flexibility to develop programs that could be used in other classes.

Besides the number of classes taught and the number of pupils served, accountability also includes objectives and results of student improvement. Evaluations and research reported in journals often times would require much more time and effort than a reading instructor has. However, pre and post testing using a standardized reading test is a method that is subject to much criticism in terms of the validity and reliability of the gain scores.

So the question is open. What are valid objectives and ways to measure student improvement that do not require an exorbitant amount of time?

6. What tests or testing programs are useful and practical?

More tests are being developed for this level, although there is still a limited choice. It would be advantageous to thoroughly test each student in each skill area. However, time prohibits. Some compromise with respect to time needs to be made. Besides the regular statistical information concerning tests, there are other considerations at this level. If the test content is too difficult, the student will become frustrated and give up. Also, if the content is too difficult, the student may improve reading skill; but the test would not be sensitive to the increase. If an easier test is used, some students will do so well that no diagnostic information is gained. So, what tests do you use? How is your testing program designed?

And so the questions go on. Please write to the quarterly and describe some method or idea that you find workable. Don't be concerned with length or topic; we welcome a variety of contributions. The area is exciting for those who like to create, but we are the most creative when challenged or stimulated by others.

Send contributions to:

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