

Do Different Texts Affect Basic Writing Students' Reading Confidence?

Background on Basic Writing at UW-Superior

A significant portion of our students come to UW-Superior identified by ACT score as Basic Writers needing instruction before they are deemed prepared for College Writing I. Over the past several years, it's been nearly 1 in 5.

UW-SUPERIOR REMEDIAL WRITING REQUIREMENT

Nearly 20% of New Freshmen entering in Fall require Writing remediation.

New Freshmen %	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	3 Yr. Avg.	New Freshmen - Remedial Count	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	3 Yr. Avg.
No Remedial Writing	87%	72%	82%	81%	No Remedial Writing	308	265	266	279
Remedial Writing Required	13%	28%	18%	20%	Remedial Writing Required	44	102	59	68

New Freshmen - Remedial %	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	3 Yr. Avg.	New Freshmen - Remedial Count	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	3 Yr. Avg.
1 st Generation	52%	45%	42%	46%	1 st Generation	23	46	25	31
Full Recipient	36%	35%	32%	35%	Full Recipient	16	36	19	24

Working on the basics of grammar concepts, writing process and organization at a slow/steady pace wasn't the worst, but we could see that it wasn't helping all the students effectively reach their potential. So, we made some changes to the curriculum to focus less on mechanics and organization, and more on process, purpose and the connection between critical reading and purposeful writing. We also saw a great opportunity to attach a dedicated Writing Center student employee as the class's Writing Mentor for extra consultations throughout the semester while they worked on drafts of papers. We saw some early success with this!



Figs 1-3 Zobel, Emily "UW-Superior Remedial Writing Requirement" UW-Superior Fall Enhancement Day, 2014. Power Point Presentation.

Students were graded according to more rigorous standards AND retention increased (admittedly looking at a short amount of time).

Writing About Writing -vs- Critical Reading and Writing

Inspired by our success from 2012-2013, we continued exploring other methods that could build an even better experience for our students. I'd long been intrigued by the concept of Writing About Writing - the premise that writing students should be reading and writing about aspects of writing itself rather than drawing on inspiration from their own lives or themed readings. So, when I came across "Seeing is Believing: Writing Studies with 'Basic Writing' Students" by Janikka Charlton, I paid close attention. Charlton's program was already running with a co-enrollment accelerated program with extra teaching support. They changed their entire program, every instructor on board, to include scholarly pieces on the teaching and learning of writing. With good testimonials in praise of asking more and receiving more, I wanted to test the waters myself in the Fall Semester of 2014. Our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning also offered the opportunity and support to document this foray! There are differences in our approaches. Not an accelerated course, only my one class, no extra teaching support, BUT I did have the chance to compare one class with a Writing About Writing textbook including most of the same texts Charlton had praised against a class with a textbook that emphasized critical reading and connecting it to writing, but without scholarly sources or direct language of rhetoric. I was interested in how the change in readings, with similar supports, would change the students' confidence in their reading. I chose confidence as a primary measure because it seemed a close match to the result of what Charlton called "Immersion" as "[students] were reading and researching directly [what] applied to them and what they were trying to do for class." I also tried to see if there were any differences in their impressions of what they were learning and its importance to their lives. I'm grateful that I had the chance to pursue this, but going on my own with two classes did limit my research base, especially when my group designated to use the Writing About Writing was only slightly above half of the size of my control group.

Charlton, Janikka. "Seeing Is Believing: Writing Studies with 'Basic Writing' Students". *Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings*. Fourth Edition. Ed. Susan Naomi Bernstein. Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's. 2013. 102-112.. Print.

The Questionnaire Responses

How Confident are you in your College Reading?

Writing about Writing					Control Group (some dropped class)				
Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
1	6	2			1	5	7	5	
1	2	6					8	5	1
		3	6				8	5	1

How Confident are you in College Writing in General?

Writing about Writing					Control Group (some dropped class)				
Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
1	2	5	1		9	7	2		
1	3	3	2		1	6	7		
		5	4			6	7	1	

How Confident are you in College Writing for this class?

Writing about Writing					Control Group (some dropped class)				
Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
1		6	2		6	8	4		
2		5	2		3	4	7		
		2	7			5	8	1	

How Confident in College Writing for other classes?

Writing about Writing					Control Group (some dropped class)				
Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
	3	5	1		6	10	1	1	
1	2	5	1		1	4	8	1	
		4	5			6	6	2	

How important will Writing be to your career?

Writing about Writing					Control Group (some dropped class)				
Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
	1	2	5	1	2	3	8	5	
	1	3	2	3	1	1	7	5	
			6	3		4	5	4	

How Do You Define College Writing?

Both groups first answered this question at the beginning of the year with emphasizing "next level" and stricter standards involving longer lengths and greater focus. Just a handful between the two classes noted purpose, clarity or organization.

At the end of the year, the Control Group answers shifted slightly - consistently mentioning "detail" and "professional". One student stood out, impressively, noting purpose, "translating thoughts & information professionally to readers."

At the end of the year, half of the Writing About Writing group's answers remained focused on the "next level" and "detail". But the other students mentioned either process of revision/improvement or purpose for the audience.

Describe something (a conversation, a reading, a meeting, a draft, etc.) that helped you to feel more confident this semester.

Control Group - A clear majority mentioned their meetings with our dedicated Writing Mentor.

Writing About Writing Group - Only three mentioned the Writing Mentor (one, notably, identifying with the Mentor having described her own writing difficulties) The remaining six students seemed split between assigned readings, peer review comments, and essays.

Reflecting on the Responses

And

Considering Future Endeavors

It's difficult to draw any real conclusions from the study when the sample sizes were so small and imbalanced. I found it very encouraging that both classes reported feeling more confident (as a whole - I'd need further analysis to track individual responses) in their writing by the end of the semester.

It was also interesting to see that most of the students saw an importance of writing to their future careers. I think I'm often guilty of discounting how much value students placed into Basic Writing courses do put on Writing, and it was an eye-opening reminder.

Anecdotally, it seemed that, at points, the Control Group was stagnating in conversations, just as, at points, the Writing About Writing Group was floundering in conversations. A mixture of the two approaches would be ideal - learning about rhetoric simultaneously as practicing very pragmatic, content-focused reading strategies as well as parts of the essay and writing process.

The Writing About Writing students I've contacted since Fall still seem to retain a larger vocabulary for discussing writing topics. *I think with a bit more scaffolding and more feedback, they'd have been more likely to recognize their progress and develop more comfort and confidence.* They were accomplishing a more difficult task, so I need to find a way to make them realize that accomplishment, the value of the task, and a more explicit recognition of the supports they have to take on the tougher reading/writing.

While the results were certainly not indicative of any magic charm of readings, they did seem to indicate that the students are capable of taking on the scholarly texts. It's something worth pursuing further, building in more supports and Writing Mentor contacts, to really tap into the benefits of "Immersion."



Thank you to the UW-Superior Provost's office, OPID, and the UW-S Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.