

English Composition (ENGL 1102) Course Redesign at East Georgia State College

Doorway Composition: An Individual, Illustrative Case Study

Val Czerny

A student's ability to transition into collegiate thinking and writing improves the likelihood of future student success. At East Georgia State College, although English 1101 is a prerequisite to English 1102, Composition II students nonetheless tend to stop short at the threshold of higher education, where it becomes difficult for many of them to embrace new concepts required for college-level thinking and writing. This illustrative case study examines a particular ENGL 1102 course redesign to assist educators in understanding how to develop their own course redesigns in a metaphorical way—and to adapt the “doorway” metaphor for individual pedagogical use.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

English 1102 (ENGL 1102) emphasizes interpretation and evaluation and focuses on skills required for effective writing in a variety of contexts, including direction that familiarizes students with research methods. A student's ability to recognize and transition into a different mode of thinking that is expected in collegiate level writing—and college instruction in general—improves the likelihood of future student success. This illustrative case study examines a particular ENGL 1102 course redesign to assist educators in developing their own course redesigns in a metaphorical way—where the metaphor can be adapted for individual pedagogical use. East Georgia State College students must pass ENGL 1101 with a grade of “C” or higher before enrolling in ENGL 1102, but ENGL 1102 students nonetheless tend to stop short at the threshold of higher education, where it becomes difficult for many of them to embrace new concepts required for college-level thinking and writing as evidenced by students freely acknowledging their interests as elsewhere than in college academics, believing that achieving success in college does not require more than bare minimal effort, and challenging notions that greater investments of time and effort are necessary—even when they attest to significant deficiencies in basic writing skills. Asked to be on the G2C course redesign committee for ENGL 1102, I focused on developing a fresh, individual, purposeful course design for EGSC students in order to address deficiencies in basic grammar and writing skills and by transitioning student thinking from secondary to a post-secondary (higher) educational mindset involving skills in critical thinking and analysis, a perceived ability to apply acquired knowledge from one context to another, and a receptiveness to learning as a recognized source of agency and motivation. I decided to utilize the “learning cycle” model of instruction, but I implemented a metaphor to make the application of the cycle phases more apprehensible and therefore more readily fixed in the mind.

In the next section, I “chart” out the metaphorical adaptations I made to the “Learning Cycle Instruction” format (Hanuscin & Lee, 2008; Marek, 2008)—where the first phase of instruction, “engagement,” becomes, in the mind's eye, the hinged side of a door, where “exploration” is the top of the doorway frame, where “explanation” is the opening side of the doorway, where “elaboration” is the threshold, and where “evaluation” is the new space on the other side of the threshold. Mentally turning each phase into a facet of a doorway allowed me to make my course changes more imaginably purposeful.

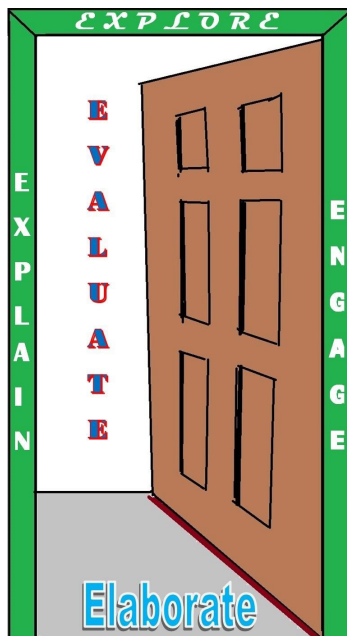
METHODS

What follows is a chart and an illustration demonstrating my adaptation of the five steps of the “Learning Cycle” model of instruction (Hanuscin & Lee, 2008; Marek, 2008), where the conceptual storyline for course redesign incorporates the metaphorical facets of a doorway:

Facet of Instruction	“Doorway” Cycle of Instruction
Hinge Side	Engage students by having them connect past and present learning experiences.
Top of Doorway	Explore and provide a common set of experiences for students.
Open Side	Explain formal language and content information, determining what students can use when transferring their knowledge in the future.
Threshold	Elaborate on the students’ developing ideas through new activities.

After students begin to step through:

New Space on the Other Side	Evaluate what students understand and can do. Encourage students to be metacognitive.
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So, a conjunctural interpretation of “engagement” translates into considering the mental image of “engagement” as a series of “hinges”—that is, ways to make connections between students’ possible past learning insights to the present concepts they are invited to acquire. The hinges represent “dovetail” methods, where segments of past learning match up with segments of new learning—joined with the “pin,” which is the instructor’s “groove” or the determinant reinforcing the juncture. Thus, in my redesign of my ENGL 1102 class, I devised learning activities and assignments that relied upon possible familiar past writing experiences (from high school or ENGL 1101), such as my use of a descriptive narrative. However, I modified the traditional descriptive narrative by adding steps requiring students to use critical thinking by establishing a rhetorical stance.

OUTCOMES

My redesign venture began with a consideration of the top of the “doorway,” where students should have enough room for an open clearing so they will not “bump their heads.” I learned from recently taking the three-part set of the USG (University System of Georgia’s) Online Development Series courses that typically students—whether a course is provided online, hybrid, or face-to-face—find learning about any particular subject matter as more engaging when writing short responses instead of long papers (Austin et al., 2020). I gradually introduced the skill of taking a rhetorical stance by constructing short response assignments. One common set of experiences that students discovered as recurrent in my new course design was their practice of using observational skills to provide writing that delivered details. When tasked with writing lengthy pieces, students’ clarity of expression often suffers, and because the task seems too large, students tend to write with general, unspecified ideas, using inexplicit, disconnected words such as “thing,” “this,” “it,” and other undefined terms. Guiding students to focus on an object they could observe, I limited their responses to just a few sentences to impel them to eliminate nonessential, vague wording. The outcome was that the short writing responses engaged students in imparting identifiable details. Thus, having practiced with several short, explanatory writing assignments, students could write more specifically and distinctly when conveying ideas in their longer writing assignments.

The open side of the “doorway” represents redesign techniques that provide opening awareness for future implementation. In my course redesign, I focused on explanations of the formal grammar of some specified sentence structures more so than in the past to attempt to open students’ understanding of other basic errors they tend to repeat simply because, customarily, they tend not to comprehend how to apply particular grammatical rules to their own writing. Also, I taught research strategies in a less complex manner than previously. I introduced the formal “language” and conventions of the MLA by teaching as I have formerly but with reduced research and citing requirements. If students learn how to provide basic citations in my class, then, in future classes, they can build upon the basics. Students do need to have the formal aspects of academic work explained to them, but not everything needs to be taught all at once or even in a semester since learning is a building process. Students still erred with basic citing, but they improved as the course progressed after I demonstrated, many times, how and when to use parenthetical citing with paraphrasing, for instance, and how to perform basic formatting—such as indenting second and subsequent lines in citations in a page of works cited. Familiarity assists with applying acquired knowledge from one context to another. Indeed, both novice and veteran scholars habitually have to search for the correct ways to cite individual sources. It’s an ongoing scholarly process, especially since the MLA periodically refashions its preferred practices.

The course of action that motivates students over the doorway’s “threshold” involves an underlying or sub-liminal elaboration of language and assignments. My threshold strategies relied upon Benjamin Franklin’s portrayal of his successes in requesting support for any endeavor by first “prepar[ing] the minds of the people” (Franklin, 1989, p. 113). To extend students’ developing ideas and to compel them to write persuasively, I used a strategy to acquaint students with adopting a position. Deliberately not focusing on directing students to devise a thesis with supporting evidence, I did not use the word, “thesis,” at all. In the past, my endeavors in instructing students regarding how to place their thesis in each of their compositions and how to develop their paragraphs around each thesis have not been highly constructive. So, exercising Franklin’s approach, I created “summary” and “narrative” assignments, while also providing required checklists and worksheets so that, by following them, students would be guided into taking and defending rhetorical stances. This is the part of the course redesign I spent the most time on, for even Franklin knew the difficulty involved and the careful, extensive time required in creating effectual plans that “prepare the minds of the people” for change.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

The “new space” on the other side of the threshold opens to view extendable advances after students’ attainments have been evaluated. For instance, when students demonstrate adopting a position, I reveal they have argued for a “thesis” or contended with a particular “theme.” Using those terms, we then expand further. When students’ writing improves as they apply acquired rules, the purpose of those rules related to content often reveals a synthesis of more complex interpretations and relationships and “other side” metacognition. When students discover that they can understand more complex interpretations and still heed the rules of structure and organization, they begin to perceive their expanding competence and grow in confidence. For example, after creating a class workshop essay, where each day we wrote a paper as a group—where I typed it so that it was visible on a screen—students began to recognize the purpose and importance of topic sentences. Nearing the end of the semester, students have approached me to tell me that they always had difficulty with knowing what to do with too many ideas, and they have recognized that their past papers have been nonsensical, disorderly, and ineffective. To be effective, William Strunk and E.B. White (1979) tell us, writing must have a plan, even if it’s a “secret plan” that organizes the sort of writing that is “essentially adventurous and impetuous” (p. 71). Learning how to write short, detailed sentences followed by learning through example by participating in group-writing workshops about how to compose a topic sentence, how to provide a specific detail as evidence, and then how to voice a viewpoint about that evidence has been a source of agency and motivation for several students who have said as much. Even though they say they have known what topic sentences are, they now recognize their structural power in helping them, first, to understand the ideas they wish to convey and, second, to give them confidence knowing they have a tool to use to express their voices. What had seemed like a bland, boring rule in the past is now recognized as a practical means of tying together nomadic, meandering ideas—not only for my course but for their other writing assignments. This higher educational mindset appeared, as well, after I encouraged several students to submit their essays to EGSC’s literary journal. I provided suggestions and advised a student to use synonyms for two of several occurrences of the word, “often,” in his introduction. “Hey Dr. Czerny,” he wrote, “I was

trying to use the repetition of 'often' to emphasize the theme of [the lack of] diversity. If it is necessary to replace it, I can, but I feel like if I use a different word, it will lose some of its meaning and stress. I was picturing it as playing the same note over and over on the piano or another instrument, like the repetition just builds up this wave of energy that gets louder and is stressed more and more. It feels like it is going to crash down to another note at any moment." In this one response, I can recognize my course redesign as having a positive effect on this student's development as a writer and thinker with a voice who has stepped through the "doorway" into a new space of acquired metacognitive, academic achievement.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

While a member of the G2C course redesign committee for ENGL 1102 at East Georgia State College, I met and worked with other members of the committee to generate and implement course redesign strategies. While the committee gained a productive learning experience from the course redesign project, an individual, illustrative case study such as this one can spotlight specific, distinctive methods implemented in course redesign in order to contribute to the "brainstorming" momentum that is an integral part of all educators' imaginative constructions and endeavors. Whereas the "Learning Cycle" model aided my course redesign project for ENGL 1102, I had to keep reviewing each individual phase of instruction in order to implement the steps. By adapting the model through the use of my "doorway" metaphor, I was able to apprehend more readily and more clearly how to apply the phases as "facets" of a doorway's frame, where the "cycle" is driven by engagement "hinges," which employ "dovetail" methods that connect past with present learning. Even though the doorway metaphor works as a mental visual for planning future assignments and challenges for my students, I have not shared it with students since many of them reach the metacognition stage and begin to analyze ways of knowing in learning situations only at the very end of a semester. Unfortunately, there are also some students who still do not overcome their self-imposed restrictions of not being interested in that which is unfamiliar to them. Instead, to encourage all my students to apply their acquired knowledge in a new context, I have them take a survey, which is a journey back to the beginning of the term and which asks them to provide their honest responses to questions about what they have learned and how they have learned it. The doorway metaphor has worked as my own visual—assisting me in creating assignments that implement past-present-future connective designs. Thus, pivotal to my individual course redesign was a three-part concept of connection, augmentation, and transition (for most doors have three hinges), and the other facets of instruction were swayed by that central "axis." Now, having a mental image of the model of instruction, I can more easily continue to develop teaching strategies that are driven by approaches that clear the way for movement over the threshold into new learning spaces, where students can recognize their potential and success on the other side.

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