

English Composition I (ENGL 1101) Course Redesign at East Georgia State College

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This case study describes the work of four faculty members at EGSC engaged in the G2C ENGL 1101 Redesign. The group agreed to focus on the third category in the G2C Course Redesign Framework: Course Structure Changes; however, we did not prescribe specific changes for the team. As this case study illustrates, allowing instructors to implement the structural changes that made sense to them resulted in a colorful patchwork quilt of classroom experiences and improvements in student engagement and success that we could share and build upon in following semesters.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

East Georgia State College joined the other Georgia state colleges and universities in the G2C initiative, recognizing the need to address low student success rates in gateway courses like English Composition (ENGL 1101). It is important to note here that our cohort is a bit behind in the G2C process due to administrative changes that disrupted the continuity of our work. Therefore, our decision to choose this focus happened in Summer 2020, and our first pilot courses as a full committee were run in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. Also, due to this disruption, one faculty member piloted courses a year ahead of the others.

We felt that focusing on Course Structure Changes, in the G2C Course Redesign Framework, was most important given that we would be facing serious challenges in course delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our approaches to course redesign based on course structure changes became a colorful patchwork quilt because we did not prescribe a certain set of course structure changes that each professor would follow. Instead, we decided that each of us would determine what course structure changes we wanted to make on our own. The one thread running throughout our ENGL 1101 redesign patchwork is our use of Open Educational Resources (OER). This is based on the English Department's decision to use OER in order to save our students money and allow more equitable access to materials for low-income students. The rest of our course redesign patchwork consists of our individual approaches to performing the interventions listed in the third category of the G2C Course Redesign Framework: Course Structure Changes. These include interventions in modes and modalities, access, assessment, and course design as described below.

METHODS

Our curriculum consists of OER materials that encouraged inclusivity and our methods varied as we implemented our G2C course structure changes. A summary of our methods includes:

- One instructor (Ren Denton) intentionally incorporated growth mindset messages into first-day messaging and writing feedback, defined assignments' purpose, and used assignments to promote social belonging and reflections on the correlation between effort and success. The instructor also made major curricular changes that included a focus on celebrity stories about struggling with reading and writing. Through reading or hearing the words of these celebrities, such as Malcolm Mitchell or Malcolm X, students recognized that success comes after a struggle. The online courses contained the same curriculum but lacked opportunities that encouraged students to connect with the stories on a personal level.

- One instructor (Julie Strickland) used multiple low-stakes assignments (quizzes, paragraph writing, finding examples in the real world) for practice and reinforcement of new skills before requiring these skills to be demonstrated through a major composition. Additionally, the instructor reordered the use of model documents in presenting writing assignments by using the model documents as reading assignments with specific questions to answer/items to identify before the writing assignment details were given.
- One instructor (AnnLiss Jordan) provided non-high stakes feedback all throughout the writing process in one-on-one sessions with differentiated help and guidance. The instructor also did not give grades for prewriting or drafting work leading up to the final draft of major essays. Instead, she provided feedback purely to help students improve and gave an overall grade for a unit based on the final draft grade.
- One instructor (Laura Chambers) added additional scaffolding steps to her writing assignments and counted each step as a major writing grade so that the students would fully invest in each part of the writing process. In addition, the instructor added more reading assignments about women's rights into her curriculum to add depth to the voices and perspectives covered in her course

OUTCOMES

Outcomes from the various approaches varied, and the following section details, by instructor and approaches, the outcomes:

- Ren Denton reported that in her face-to-face course revised with Mindset Pedagogies, students connected to each other through robust in-class discussions and demonstrated greater empathy for others as well as a greater recognition of the correlation between the fixed mindset and growth mindset. The success rate for Fall 2020 was sixty-one percent, six percent above the institutional average for student success in English Composition I. However, the same revised course in the online format saw a thirty-five percent success rate, seven percent below the success rate for online sections of English Composition I. The difference in success rates highlights the importance of the social component or social belonging aspect of Growth Mindset Pedagogies, as community-building in online environments can be more challenging.
- Julie Strickland reported that reorganizing the order of teaching materials for the researched argument essay unit and adding low-stakes activities that promoted student discovery and practice of new skills proved valuable to the class. Anecdotally, during the unit, informal assessment of group and individual understanding became much easier as the students readily identified concepts and asked questions using appropriate vocabulary. This evidence inspired confidence in the class as they approached the paper deadline. In Spring 2020 prior to the pilot, the pass rate (70 or better) for those who submitted this paper was 50%. Using the same assignment parameters and grading rubric, the pass rate in the pilot term of Fall 2020 was 65%. The results in one section of mostly repeating students in Spring 2021 was 58%.
- AnnLiss Jordan reported that students who chose to participate in her intervention activities generally did very well, but her challenge seems to be in increasing student participation in these activities. She made many of the activities extra credit and is considering the possible impact of this decision.
- Laura Chambers reported that students did a much more thorough job in each step of her scaffolded writing process since each step counted as a major writing grade. This produced final products of good to high quality for a great majority of students who completed each step. Students also responded well to the addition of readings on women's rights. While Instructor Chambers has been careful to include African American voices in her curriculum for many years, she realized that her curriculum lacks in including female voices to the same extent. Therefore, she included more readings on women's rights and saw greater engagement from her students in class discussions, particularly from the females.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

All faculty involved in this project intend to continue the interventions that they have begun in their pilot courses because we have all seen improvement in student engagement and learning outcomes. However, since we have had only two semesters of pilot courses to reflect upon, we are only about halfway through the G2C process for

ENGL 1101. We still must pull statistical data for both semesters to see where each of our courses ranked in relation to the institutional average for student success. While Ren Denton does provide this information for one of her courses in Fall 2020, we do not have statistical information for any of the other pilot courses from Fall 2020 or Spring 2021. Therefore, for the most part, what we have provided here in this report is qualitative analysis, and we understand that we need to shore up our observations with the quantitative data as we continue the process. We hope to expand the use of our interventions by presenting our course structure changes and resulting observations to our colleagues in a Faculty Development Workshop setting, perhaps during our upcoming Fall Faculty Workshop. By presenting to our colleagues, we may be able to influence how they approach their course design and further disseminate G2C concepts in other courses throughout the college.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our efforts not only had successful outcomes for students, but also inspired deeper understanding and raised further research questions for the instructors. To demonstrate a more specific example of what we've learned, we will end with Ren Denton's excellent summary of her lessons learned: "In addition to realizing the importance of social belonging in the learning process, I am also seeing a correlation between growth mindset and behavioral improvement. Since my course revisions, students' disruptive behaviors (being on the phone, coming late, being belligerent) have improved significantly. At first, I thought their behaviors were signs of rudeness or immaturity. In other words, I misread bad behavior as personality defects instead of the students' inability to manage their fears of failure. T. Scott Bledsoe and Janice J. Baskin (2014) discuss student fear in their article, *Recognizing Student Fear: The Elephant in the Classroom*. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) claim that student learning cannot take place until educators find strategies that will help students manage their fear of failure and fear of being laughed at because these fears are often so strong and overwhelming that they short-circuit the nervous system and impact memory and other brain functions. We have learned that the G2C approach to course redesign is effective. It creates a more equitable classroom with greater student engagement and success.

REFERENCES

Bledsoe, S., & Basin, J. J. (2014). *Recognizing student fear: The elephant in the classroom*. *College teaching*, 62(1), 32-41.1).