

English Composition II (ENGL 1102) 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 1102 Redesign. As part of a larger committee, we 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. Allowing instructors to implement the structural changes that made sense to them resulted in another colorful patchwork quilt (like our ENGL 1101 redesign) 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. 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 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. 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

This section provides a description of the unique redesign approaches used in each of our courses.

- In Val Czerny's class, to achieve improvement regarding students measuring their own progress throughout a semester in ENGL 1102, she targeted activities and assignments providing better transitioning into awakening growth mindsets—prompting students to shelve old habits and embrace new, scholarly ones. The habits addressed were based on “fixed mindsets,” where the belief that people possess unacquired, natural talent leads to viewing effort as profitless and to operating under a pretense of appearing intelligent while shunning challenges. This mindset purposely spurns effort because having to work at learning demonstrates, in the fixed mindset, a lack of intelligence (Dweck, 2016, pp. 39-40). Ultimately, the goal was to design assignments and activities to foster, as much as possible, the belief and self-regard in students that, over time, their individual intellects can broaden and advance.
- In Ren Denton's class, Mary Ann Winkelmes' Transparency Framework was used to give students a sense of purpose and ease their anxiety about being graded on their perceived differences in ideology. A social justice

lecture that introduces the unit 'Literature and the Argument about Race' was "TILTed," meaning students were provided with a transparent framework that identified the learning objective (and the way it connects to the course's learning objectives), the purpose, the skills and knowledge they will gain, the tasks students will be asked to do, the way they will be assessed on the written argument construction (not opinion), resources available, and technology requirements.

- Kathy Whitaker provided students with opportunities to receive feedback from their peers by starting with the basic peer review normally used in the essay writing process and redesigning it through the development of a set of general to specific step-down exercises.
- Like the approach used in her ENGL 1101 course redesign, Laura Chambers broke the major research paper down into smaller steps and made each step a major writing grade so that students would be more invested in doing a good job on each part of the writing process.

OUTCOMES

The varied approaches used in the ENGL 1102 course redesign described in this case resulted in several promising outcomes described in this section.

- In Val Czerny's class, she emphasized issues about belonging in the college classroom (Rattan et al., 2015, p. 722) by explaining what it means to be a 'scholar' and by disclosing that, for instance, students' efforts at analysis and interpretation define them as emerging critical thinkers and yet-to-be-trained critics. Instead of focusing on grading that reports performance, she highlighted progress through process and improvement over time (Rattan et al., 2015, p. 724). Specific strategies included assigning fewer papers with the addition of smaller assignments designed for cognition and possible integration into the 'higher stakes' papers. Such opportunities showing process through smaller steps have generally been untried in the past due to time constraints. This process revealed that that pre-work activities increase creativity, can accommodate new technologies, and can allow for more guided peer-brainstorming and peer-editing sessions, which increase social rapport in a learning environment and therefore assist with community-based amiability and an increased growth mindset, where students can see their efforts as a path to proficiency as well as to enhanced social bonding within an academic environment.
- In Ren Denton's classes, the fact that the majority of the students finished the unit "Arguments about Race" and the course during the pandemic shows how the TILT method provided a seamless transition, as she continued using the TILT method to promote transparency for the remainder of the semester. In fact, the conversion to remote learning provided an opportunity to TILT the writing assignment and create a writing workshop that replicated the series of in-class writing workshops that would generally be held during the time students are working on their paper. The TILTed workshops gave students a deeper understanding of the writing process, as evidenced by the well-organized writing samples of those who completed the workshop compared to those who did not complete the workshop.
- While the changes in Kathy Whitaker's class did not result in students completing all of the assignments in the course, overall, student essays were better following the course changes that were implemented. Specifically, there was a better overall focus and a more clearly defined thesis statement. The changes did not appear to help with grammar or mechanical issues, but the organization of the essays were better. The thesis and rough draft were submitted through an assignment dropbox, so they were scanned for plagiarism, which provided the opportunity to work on any issues with students privately before they submitted their final paper.
- For Laura Chambers, Spring 2021 proved to be the best semester yet for her ENGL 1102 classes, and in fact, it was one of the best outcomes ever in her career. She was thrilled to find that in one class 16 out of 17 research paper final drafts earned a 70 or higher. In another section of her course, 12 out of 12 research paper final drafts earned a 70 or higher. Overall, success rates were unprecedented!

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

For each instructor involved in the ENGL 1102 course redesign at EGSC, the plans for continuation and potential expansion of their course redesign are unique. The following section details each individual plan.

- Val Czerny plans to increase students' adeptness in monitoring their opportunities for success by continuing to interweave growth mindset strategies in class activities and assignments so students discover, for themselves, the benefits of succeeding. For example, whereas a growth mindset views criticism as a springboard for further learning, students who have settled into fixed mindsets evade confronting constructive criticism in order to appear intelligent. Weaving in 'nuts and bolts' steps and worksheets in assignments that highlight progress in student work assists us in providing constructive criticism that opens up opportunities for praise that is based not specifically on talent and performance (Dweck, 2007, p. 41), but on appropriate, consistent work, effort, and process, where students can embrace their writing as works-in-progress."
- For Ren Denton, with purpose, skills, knowledge, and grading criteria identified for them [students], they had more confidence that their own voices and opinions mattered and that they were not going to be graded on any inclination to agree with their professor. As a result, she will continue to TILT and expand the TILT method to courses, assignments, and activities.
- Professor Whitaker intends to continue this process in future classes while tweaking it a bit. Specifically, she plans to add a Flipgrid peer review video project to her ENGL 1102 and ENGL 1101 classes. For her literature classes, she believes the process will be helpful but will not require as many levels in the structure. Finally, she plans to put an emphasis on the plagiarism checking aspect of the assignment to help students with avoiding this mistake.
- Given the initial outcomes from her course redesign efforts, Laura Chambers intends to continue her existing approaches across the sections of her course.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

This section details the reflections from each instructor on the lessons learned and potential implications for their ENGL 1102 course redesign work.

- For Val Czerny, while she has incorporated assignments providing transitioning and balance for student mindsets and constructively prompted students to shelve old habits and adopt new, scholarly ones, she has learned to be mindful that old habits, like procrastination, do persist. Whereas many students welcome smaller, "less costly" assignments as enlivening opportunities to recognize promising potential in their thinking and writing, other students, miscomprehending the full instructional strategy, even when it is communicated to them, think smaller assignments are easy and produce eleventh-hour work that demonstrates major shortcomings. Without grasping the preliminary work, procrastinating students can run aground for the 'higher stakes' assignments. Overall, however, the course redesign strategies have productively enlivened the "choreography" of the courses, yielding fresh, innovative steps that invite students to embrace success.
- Professor Whitaker indicated that overall, this process works to help students better organize and structure their writing, although finding ways to encourage more and better participation continues to be a struggle. For the future, she plans to make it a lesson in and of itself and go over each element instead of just laying it out as an element of the essay. Hopefully, making this a normal part of the essay process will help students to improve their work overall.
- Finally, from Laura Chambers: "This G2C stuff works!"

REFERENCES

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