

From High School to College: Teachers and Students Assess the Impact of an Expository Reading and Writing Course on College Readiness

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The study aimed to examine teachers' and students' views on the impact of the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) on students' college readiness and on teaching practices. Literature in the areas of college readiness, critiques of the English curriculum at the secondary level, and a review of research on the effects of ERWC are summarized. The mixed-methods study used a teacher survey, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. Findings showed that teachers reported making numerous changes and improvements in their teaching as a result of attending a professional development program and also reported making changes in other courses. Teachers found that ERWC helped student engagement, motivation, and learning and helped prepare students for college. Students reported learning strategies in the class that they transfer and apply in other classes. Using ERWC materials can strengthen participating teachers' instruction and participating students' learning.

Keywords: *academic literacy, college, common core state standards, effective practices in literacy instruction, readiness, reading and writing rhetorically*

Introduction

In colleges and universities, admissions officers and faculty assume that students who satisfactorily complete the approved and required courses for college entrance are adequately prepared for coursework. Approximately 53% of high school graduates enroll in remedial classes at the postsecondary level (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). Even for those students who enter college as highly qualified, remediation courses are necessary (Antonio & Bersola, 2004).

The level of remediation at [...] the UC system as a whole is cause for public concern. The education policy question centers on the adequacy of high school preparation for university work: Why are so many students who are deemed admissible by UC eligibility and selection criteria unable to read and write at the college level? (p. 42)

Rampey, Dion, and Donahue (2009) reported that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data on 13- and 17-year-olds reveal a stable trend over the last 33 years. Twelfth graders in 2005 scored lower on NAEP than those in 1992, and declines were seen at all levels of performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Loomis and Bourque (2001) concluded that NAEP data show that 65% of 12th graders are reading below grade level.

The California State University (CSU), in conjunction with a statewide English Task Force comprised of CSU faculty and high school educators, developed a systemic approach to academic preparation that integrates professional development, expository curriculum, and text interaction strategies. The professional development effort has included the training of over 7,000 teachers statewide, and it has proven to be very successful. The professional development programs, the Reading Institute for Academic Preparation and the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC), focus on helping teachers teach their high school students the literacy skills they will need to be successful in college. These programs introduce teachers to the ERWC curricular materials, which include an expository literacy template and modules for students. In California, 565 schools have adopted the curriculum.

The ERWC is a rhetoric-based college preparatory course that emphasizes in-depth study of expository, analytical, and argumentative writing. It was designed to help teachers acquire a better understanding of effective strategies to prepare students for college-level reading and writing. Structured around an assignment template that addresses several stages of reading and writing, ERWC has a binder with 14 modules for each semester; each module contains expository text and a sequence of integrated reading and writing assignments meant to enhance rhetorical analysis. By combining reading and writing strategies, students are able to practice the essential foundational skills necessary for college-level composition.

Students are required to survey the text, make predictions, annotate and question the text, analyze rhetorical structures, and use texts to support their own arguments. For each of the fourteen modules, teachers raise questions that reinforce analytical habits. Teachers and students receive separate binders with instructions and numerous handouts related to enhancing the analysis of expository text. They also receive books that help students forge the reading–writing connection by discussing (a) how to take a stance, (b) how to gather evidence, and (c) how to use the ideas of others for their own rhetorical purposes.

CSU's effort to reduce remediation through the development of a college preparatory course extends the national conversation on college readiness. To better understand the efficacy of this effort, we completed an evaluation study that examined teacher and student views of the impact of an ERWC on teaching practice, student learning, and college readiness. The study explores major changes in teaching and learning as identified by participants and students. Specific research questions include the following:

1. How do teachers perceive the impact of an ERWC on their instructional practices and attitudinal beliefs?
2. How do teachers assess the impact of attending an ERWC on high school students' learning and academic readiness for college?
3. How do participating students assess the impact of the curriculum on their reading and writing skills?

Theoretical Framework

Extant literature related to the study encompassed three areas: (1) definitions of college readiness, (2) evaluations and critiques of English curriculum at the secondary level, and (3) reviews of research that analyze the effects of ERWC.

Definitions of College Readiness

There are numerous definitions of college readiness in literature. Greene and Winters (2005) argued that the minimum qualifications a student must meet to be ready for the least selective universities are (a) earning a high school diploma, (b) mastering basic reading skills, and (c) completing the least burdensome course requirements. Using this definition, only 34% of American students graduate college-ready.

A report from ACT found that “the clearest differentiation in reading between students who are college-ready and those who are not is the ability to comprehend complex text” (ACT, 2007, p. 25). The ACT report recommended strengthening reading instruction in all high school courses by incorporating complex reading materials into course content. It also recommended that state standards should explicitly define reading expectations across all courses. Although a recent ACT report concluded that about half (52%) of 2012 high school graduates were ready for college-level reading, the percentage of students who were ready is substantially smaller in some subgroups such as Latinos (36%) and African Americans (22%; ACT, 2012). Another recent report (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006) noted that “only one-third of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks—analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources” (p. 6). Numerous scholars have recognized that this ability to synthesize and analyze texts reflects the types of higher order thinking necessary to succeed in college.

Conley’s (2007) definition of being college-ready includes (a) cognitive strategies and habits of mind, skills for learning college-level content, and critical-thinking skills; (b) key content knowledge and essential knowledge in the discipline; (c) academic behaviors such as reading comprehension, time management, and metacognitive strategies; and (d) contextual skills including the practical skills of getting into and succeeding in college. Conley’s research revealed that “college instructors consider such key cognitive strategies as analytic and problem solving skills to be as consequential for college readiness as specific content knowledge” (Lloyd, 2009, p. 34). Since Conley’s study was first published, discussions around how to define college readiness have continued at the national level.

A special edition of *Diplomas Count* in *Education Week* (2009) included a graduation rate analysis, state reports, data systems, and measurement issues. Lloyd (2009) noted that the national consensus on the meaning of readiness has been elusive. In a survey of 30 states, definitions and measures of college readiness varied across the United States. More states are determining clear, assessable definitions of college-ready. State expectations for readiness are conveyed through course requirements, skill execution, state standards, and a variety of diagnostic assessments: 14 states use academic standards to measure readiness, 13 use course requirements, 8 use tests, 7 use the attainment of skills, and 13 rely on a multifaceted definition (some combination of standards, courses, tests, and skills). Although there is widespread agreement that too few high school students display college-readiness skills, a broad consensus on what exactly *readiness* entails remains hard to pin down. Many states have not yet come up with definitions or benchmarks of college readiness.

For some high schools, taking responsibility for college and career readiness for all students is a relatively new concept. In the past, the focus in preparation for postsecondary work has primarily been on meeting college eligibility requirements, with the center of attention on fulfilling Carnegie unit requirements (Hafner, Joseph, & McCormick, 2010). In California, the University of California (UC) system has defined high school course requirements necessary to qualify for both (UC and CSU) public university systems. Completion of designated courses is tantamount to college eligibility for many applicants, along with a specified grade point average.

Students who have met course-based eligibility requirements for college may actually not be prepared or ready for college-level work (Conley, 2003). For example, NAEP reading data show that scores of 12th graders in 2009 fell compared to scores in 1992 (from 292 to 288), and declines were seen at all levels of performance since 1992 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Gewertz (2009) found that less than one-quarter of high school seniors who took the ACT scored at the *college-ready* level in all four subject areas. In addition, 67% of students met that benchmark in English, and 53% met the benchmark in reading.

A recent report on developmental education in minority-serving institutions (Parker, 2012) discusses the national policy environment regarding developmental education. The Getting Past Go policy database (GettingPastGo.org) reports that there are about 200 remedial education policies across the United States. Some states require institutions to report the number of students enrolled in remedial courses; 19 states require public colleges to assess their students' readiness for college-level work. Many states require standardized exams (e.g., ACT, SAT, Accuplacer) and choose cutoff scores on other placement tests that are usually benchmarked to standardized tests. Some states require students to complete any required remedial courses before they take college-level courses. In California, the CSU system has a rule that students who do not successfully complete remedial courses within 15 months after starting will be disenrolled, regardless of how they performed in other classes.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative (www.CoreStandards.org) is an attempt to develop and adopt a core set of college readiness standards in math and English language arts (Lederman, 2009). All states but Texas and Alaska have signed onto the initiative. The following groups have sponsored the initiative: the Council of Chief State School Officers, Achieve, ACT, College Board, and the National Governors Association. Identifying standards and expectations that are consistent across all states will help students understand what is expected of them, help parents understand what is expected of students, and allow for improved preservice and professional development of teachers. The CCSS for English and math college readiness have been identified. An expert validation committee has reviewed standards in the content areas, and assessments were developed to diagnose student skill levels in these key areas. Math and English teams are currently piloting the assessment tasks in the states.

A national consensus on a definition of college readiness has not been achieved, but there is some agreement that between one-third and one-half of high school graduates are college-ready. A strong high school curriculum that integrates reading, writing, and critical thinking skills is necessary for students to be ready for college-level work.

Critiques of English Curriculum on the Secondary Level

The majority of students in California take literature-based classes in 11th grade (American literature) and 12th grade (British literature). At many high schools, students can also take honors and Advanced Placement (AP) English (AP language and/or AP literature). In their senior year, non-AP students can also have elective choices, which vary by district and school. The large majority of students, however, take British literature.

All California high school English classrooms must follow the *English Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools* (California Department of Education, 1998). Traditional English classrooms focus on standards and include the teaching of writing and conventions using a general approach. Few use a rhetorical approach, which most colleges expect their students to know. In traditional high school classrooms, 11th grade teachers focus on narrative analysis of themes and different literacy devices in American literature. In 12th grade, narrative analysis continues in the exploration of British literature. Students read from the canon of British literature and contrast the majority of literary forms, techniques, and characteristics of the eras in which they were written. In some schools, students can take semester electives on poetry, science fiction, social issues, Shakespeare, and other subsections of the high school standards.

The traditional high school focus on American and British literature tends to weaken secondary students' ability to read and write about nonfiction critically. Routinely, college professors report that freshmen arrive unprepared for the rigorous demands of college work (ACT, 2007). An Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (2002) at CSU found that 83% of CSU faculty members attribute their students' lack of success in a course to a lack of analytical reading skills. It is evident that high school standards, assessments, and curricula are not aligned to college—and that it is not entirely the fault of students.

With the introduction of CCSS, in California, there is a new, stronger focus on incorporating strategies to approach more complex pieces of nonfiction. In addition, teachers are urged to use rhetorical devices such as ethos, pathos, and logos to support assertions and to use reading and writing strategies across all courses.

With the unveiling of the CCSS, research has focused on comparing them with state-level standards in terms of content, topics, and depth of challenge. A recent study (Conley et al., 2011) compared the CCSS content and curriculum standards with several state standards, including those of California, Texas, and Massachusetts, as well as with other standards. The report found some alignment in the topics covered and range of content. The mathematics standards lined up almost completely, while the English language arts standards did not line up as well. In English language arts, the CCSS expected more cognitive complexity than the state standards. The state standards generally did not have as much challenge as the CCSS in the areas of reading from informational text, textual analysis, and literacy development.

Rothman (2011) maintained that the CCSS differ significantly from state standards in terms of the level of knowledge and skills required and the expectations for reading increasingly complex texts. A University of Pennsylvania (2011) study conducted by Porter found large, significant differences between the CCSS and state standards. The gaps were mainly because the CCSS standards devote more focus on understanding and analyzing written materials and higher order thinking skills.

Another recent study (Kober & Rentner, 2011) surveyed a nationally representative sample of school districts across the 43 states (and the District of Columbia) that adopted the CCSS. One of the

findings was that about three-fifths of the districts viewed the CCSS as more rigorous than the state standards that they are replacing, and district staff expected the CCSS to improve student learning. There is agreement among most researchers and practitioners that the CCSS in English are much more rigorous than current state standards. This may be one reason why so many students are unprepared for the rigors of college work.

Research and Evaluation of the ERWC

Several formal evaluations of ERWC program outcomes have revealed promising results. Schools with high percentages of ERWC-trained teachers have outperformed comparable schools with low percentages of trained teachers on statewide assessments. They have also outperformed the statewide average in the percentage of students who scored proficient or above on the state language arts test and increases are evident in scale score growth over time (Hafner & Joseph, 2008; Hafner & Slovacek, 2006). Field observation and structured interviews with both teachers and students indicated that ERWC reinforces critical reading skills through prereading activities such as conceptual mapping, quick-writes, and vocabulary instruction (Moss & Bordelon, 2008). Findings also indicated that a curricular focus on the structural analysis of a text enhances reading comprehension and a student's ability to write an expository essay. Moss and Bordelon's study pointed to challenges that accompany the curriculum, such as the lack of sufficient focus on writing and an overemphasis on preparation for the English Placement Test, a standardized assessment developed by CSU to measure college readiness. Other research and evaluation studies have presented evidence that the ERWC program is an effective change agent for student achievement and college access (Cline, Bissell, Hafner, & Katz, 2007; Hafner & Joseph, 2008; Street, Fletcher, Merrill, Katz, & Cline, 2008).

Methodology

This study was guided by a conceptual framework that views student learning and college readiness as a function of three interrelated classes of variables including (1) ERWC curriculum and the professional development, (2) teacher knowledge and practices, and (3) student engagement and classroom behaviors. Figure 1 displays this framework with an emphasis on the mechanisms through which ERWC affects college readiness. Within each of the three classes are subcategories or examples of measure. Arrows denote the direction of influence. The study is designed to test this conceptual framework and the degree to which various classes and variables influence readiness.

The researchers used a mixed-methods design to examine teachers' and students' views on the effectiveness of the English professional development initiative. We collected the process and outcome data through surveys and interviews from teacher participants and from student focus groups.

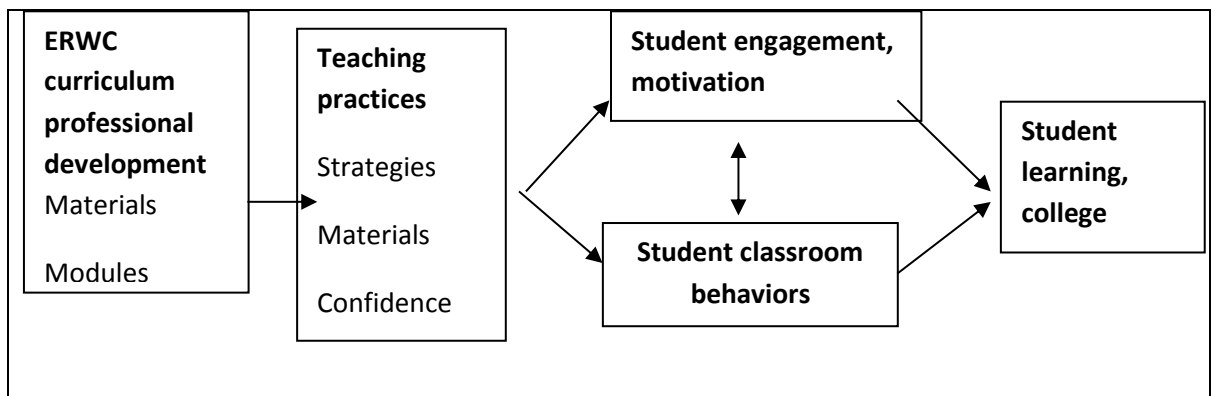


Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework: Impact of English Professional Development on Teaching Practices, Student Engagement, Behavior, Learning, and College Readiness*

Participants and Samples

To gather data, researchers visited five schools in three districts that use the ERWC course and modules. The districts were selected on the basis of their ongoing commitment to reform, as were school sites in those districts that included several teachers who had received ERWC professional development. Thus, the schools and districts made up a purposive sample. Districts included a large one in urban Los Angeles County, a medium-sized one in the Northern California Bay Area, and a medium-sized district in San Diego County. Two out of the three districts were early adopters of the curriculum and had sent at least three teachers per school to receive the 4-day ERWC training. Four out of five schools used the course in a 12th grade course for midlevel seniors. One school distributed the curriculum modules through all four grade levels. All schools taught diverse student populations, with three schools also serving large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

Researchers observed 21 teachers in their classrooms and interviewed 24 teachers. All of the teachers observed and interviewed taught an ERWC course. Immediately after the classroom observation, the researchers interviewed the teachers. Researchers audiotaped the interviews and subsequently transcribed them. We did not videotape teacher observations, but took notes on the observation, focusing on the following elements: goals for the lesson, choice of curricular materials, ways the curricular materials may have assisted teachers in the attaining stated goals of the lesson, and challenges the materials may have posed. After the lesson, we drew from observational notes and asked specific questions about content and instruction. Questions, such as the following, were standard:

1. What were your goals for the lesson I just observed?
2. How did you choose your instructional methods?
3. How did you choose content materials?
4. What went well with this lesson?
5. What, if any, changes did you experience?
6. How did the curricular materials assist you?
7. How did the materials pose challenges?

The sample for the teacher web survey included most of the California teachers who had attended ERWC training from 2005 through 2008; UC kept a database with name, email, and district

information. This totaled about 1,200 participants with valid email addresses. A total of 290 teachers responded, for a response rate of 24%.

Researchers held three student focus groups in three schools with students who were in ERWC courses. This included 15 students in a purposive sample.

Instruments

The teacher questionnaire contained several multiple-choice items and six open-ended questions. The open-ended items asked about the following: (a) demographics, (b) ERWC training, (c) changes teachers made as a result of the professional development, (d) changes observed in students, (e) impact on student learning, and (f) any additional comments. The research team designed teacher interview protocols and a student focus group protocol. Focus group posed questions about benefits of the course and use of strategies in other classes.

Data Analysis

After the open-ended survey items and interviews were transcribed, the researchers coded transcriptions by hand using open and axial coding. We reviewed each transcript several times to identify codes, relying on an open coding technique to identify key elements or codes (Creswell, 2007). By searching keywords and phrases within each transcript, the researchers identified initial codes. Then we used axial coding to create broader connections combining similar codes into larger categories to derive meaning from the text. Responses were grouped using counts. Quantitative survey data were analyzed, using frequencies and descriptive statistics, using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences.

Results

An analysis of the responses to close and open-ended questions in the survey and interviews revealed an underlying structure of the effect of the ERWC professional development on three key areas: (1) teaching practices, (2) student engagement and behavior, and (3) student learning and college preparedness, illustrated in the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

Changes in Teaching Practices

The first part of the model includes the curriculum principles, materials, and modules. These influence the teachers' practices and strategies. The second part of the logic model includes teaching practices, strategies, skills, and confidence.

On the web survey, teachers were asked to describe whether they made any changes (in materials, pedagogical approaches, use of texts, or approach to assessment) as a result of attending the professional development program. They could report on multiple changes. Teachers' comments focused on three ways in which the ERWC professional development changed their teaching: using ERWC materials, using strategies, and changing their methods for teaching reading. About one-third of comments (32%) concerned the use of ERWC strategies, either in general or by reference to specific strategies (see Figure 2).

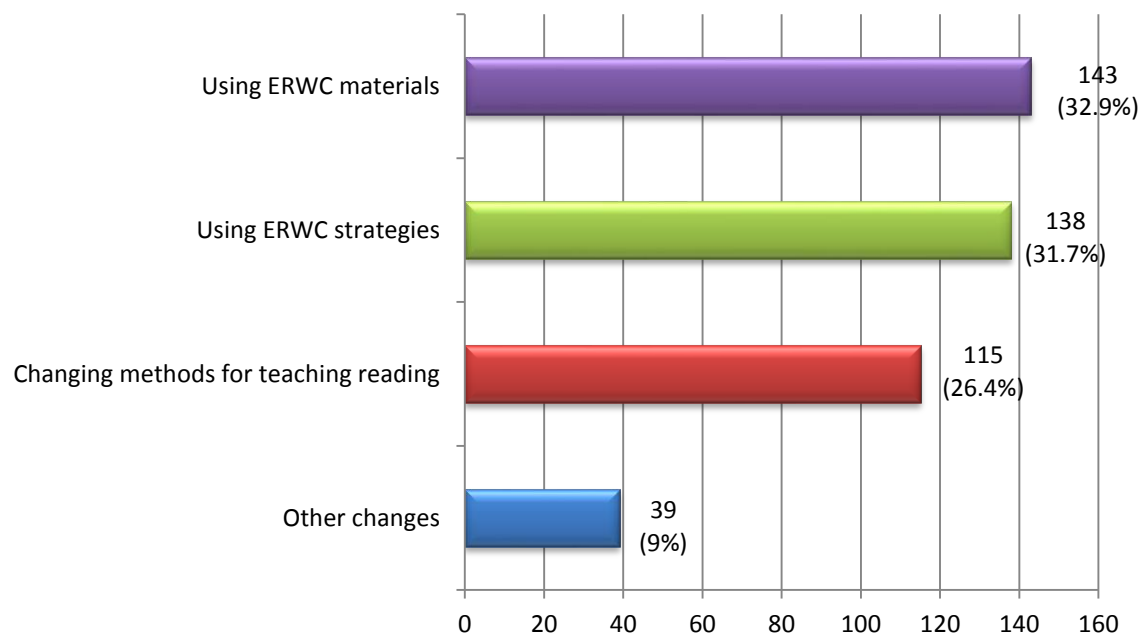


Figure 2: *Changes in Teaching Resulting From ERWC*

A sizeable proportion of the teachers (33%) mentioned using materials provided by ERWC, including the modules, the template, and nonfiction readings in general. Asked about their use of the curricular material, the majority of teachers (55%) reported just using “a few modules,” 17% reported they did not use materials at all or just used the template, and 28% reported high use of the materials.

In contrast to the other responses to this question, only a handful of teachers expressed negative views about the materials. These comments indicated that the materials were out of date, not relevant to the teacher’s student population, or too repetitive; however, the overwhelming number of teachers had only positive and appreciative comments about the materials.

Another large group of comments (32%) concerned the use of ERWC strategies, either in general, or in reference to specific strategies. Typical comments about the use of ERWC strategies included the following:

- I implement many different strategies/approaches learned from these classes.
- I utilize the vocabulary strategies.
- I use the teaching strategies and the learning activities.
- I use the individual reading predictions strategies.
- I have been provided with prereading strategies [and] postreading strategies.
- [I use] engaging text and the scaffolding strategies.
- Annotating strategies [are] emphasized much more.
- The workshops have given me some useful tools and interesting approaches to add to my strategies for engaging students.

One other group of comments concerned changes in the teaching of reading, mentioned by more than one of every four teachers (26%). A sample of typical comments follows:

- I've learned how important it is that [students] are engaged before reading, during reading, and after.
- I am more aware of strategies to make the reading more accessible to students.
- The process—read for gist, read for detail, read for structure—is very useful.
- [I've] included additional expository reading strategies in class.
- I teach close reading and persuasive writing to be more interactive and exciting.
- I increased the number of times I went back to reread the text with the students.

Another of the open-ended questions asked whether the ERWC training had affected teachers' instruction outside of ERWC-designated classes. About 60% of teachers in the survey answered this question, but nearly all respondents indicated that the ERWC training affected their instruction in other courses in a positive way (see Figure 3). While only 154 teachers commented on this question, each comment could contain multiple themes (total comments in Figure 3 = 230).

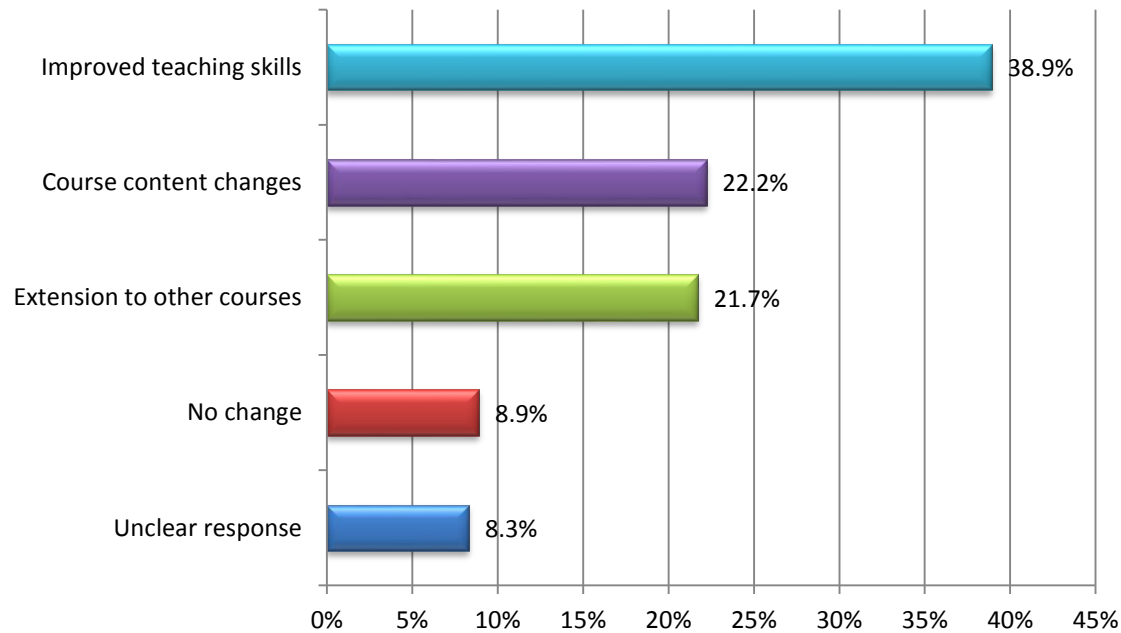


Figure 3: *Teaching Changes Outside of ERWC Class*

The most notable type of change was an all-around improvement in teaching skills indicated by 39% of teachers, followed by changes in the content of other courses (22%) and the extension of ERWC strategies to other student populations or other teaching assignments (22%). Only a few teachers (9%) indicated that they had not made any changes outside of ERWC courses, mainly because they had no other teaching assignments, were administrators, had retired, or were already using the strategies before they attended the training. The remaining responses (8%) were unclear, often just one-word answers that were difficult to interpret.

The largest group of responses was from teachers who indicated either generally positive changes or specific changes they regarded as improvements in their teaching. Teachers in this group used words such as “(re)invigorated” or “fresh” to describe general changes.

Other teachers in this group commented on specific improvements in teaching techniques:

- [It] expanded my repertoire of effective activities.
- I am reminded more often to be consistent in teaching reading and writing strategies in every assignment.
- Preparation, preparation, preparation.
- I now have a better arsenal of strategies.
- It made me think about how to use texts.
- [It] made me think about how I organize.
- I use different and more varied approaches to teach.

Teachers who made changes in other courses outside ERWC often commented on how they changed the materials they now use in their teaching:

- I focus more on pathos, logos, and ethos.
- [I've] added more nonfiction.
- I find my own articles and use the templates to set them up.

Overall, respondents expressed increased confidence and that they had learned new methods and better strategies for teaching as well as how to structure learning. They also appreciated having the ability to provide clear expectations for learning and means to hold students accountable for learning. Many of the comments expressed a new appreciation for what students need to succeed in college. For example, one teacher noted, “I have a clear picture of what students need in order to succeed in college.” Another noted, “My students have come back and told me that ERWC prepares them for college English.”

In summary, responding teachers reported multiple changes in their teaching practice, including use of ERWC materials, using more strategies, and changes in teaching reading. In addition, a majority of the teachers reported that the training affected their instruction in other courses (e.g., changes in course content or delivery) and that they had an overall improvement in teaching skills.

Impact on Students’ Engagement and Behavior

According to teacher reports, there appear to be at least two intermediary influences between teaching practices and student learning: a change in student attitudes and a change in student behavior. This aligns with the study’s conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

When asked what benefits the ERWC course had on their students’ reading and writing skills, performance, and on student enjoyment of English, the teacher respondents described common student responses to the ERWC experience as “liking” or “loving” the course. Teachers reported that students displayed high interest in the subject matter of the course. Teachers who participated in the ERWC professional development training also reported that students used class time much more efficiently. This was attributed to better preparation on the part of students and to more participation in higher level class discussions. Teachers also reported that students practiced knowledge and skills more, spent more time on task, and as a result were more likely to overcome identified weaknesses.

Students Report Benefits in Other Classes

Students reported that they relied on ERWC strategies in other courses, including AP psychology and anatomy. One student described how her ability to summarize and annotate paragraphs helped her overall comprehension of entire chapters in AP psychology. She shared,

I've been reading whole chapters in AP Psychology. I was taught in Expos, like summarizing the paragraph vs. the whole article itself. Like finding the main idea and then making an opinion on it or trying to understand it, then going to the next one. And then by that it just kind of incorporates like knowledge memory for me vs. just reading everything and then going back and not remembering any of it. So by Expos I've learned to incorporate different verbs or specific words to make me remember what the article or specific paragraph was about.

Another student applied her text analysis skills to anatomy:

This might sound kind of strange. I take anatomy and we have to skim and scan notes. I don't really do them. I copy the book and then annotate the book and I actually annotate the book. It's weird for me to do that. I guess it's from Expos. I wanna write, I wanna highlight, I wanna write what's on the paper. So, I copy the book on a piece of paper and then [...] I learned a lot better that way from Expos.

Yet another student stated how the class had improved her writing in economics:

Yeah, I had to write an essay for econ. It took me three hours to write an essay, because I had to actually research an article about what I'm trying to do, and I learned all that from Expos. Learning all that in Expos helped for when I have to write an essay for other classes. It's helped me a lot.

Connecting the arguments of authors with each other and with themselves was another gain that students described. One student wrote:

Relating them together, relating articles written by people with different viewpoints, but finding one common topic or theme in an essay. Before it was like oh, this person said this, and this person said this and they're not the same thing. Really, you can find similarities in them, and kind of bring upon your own view or bring upon your own argument.

The student focus groups contained the same emergent themes as the teacher reports. Participating students benefitted from the course, especially in the area of transferring and applying the ERWC strategies to other courses. Some students had negative comments about the course as a result of their district requiring the class. Few students enjoy an additional required course added to their degree audit, and this concern should not be perceived as a critique of the curriculum.

Student Learning and College Preparedness

The last part of the study's conceptual framework is student learning and college readiness. On the survey, teachers were asked whether they noticed any improvement in their students' reading and

writing skills since they started using the materials: 85% reported improvements. The teachers who participated in this professional development overwhelmingly used positive comments on this survey question concerning their students' learning in general. Comments included the following:

- More students are passing placement tests.
- I think they are better writers, thinkers, and conversationalists.
- I think students are more comfortable attacking fiction.
- Students view reading and writing differently, as a craft they can learn and practice.
- Kids seem better prepared for college.
- They are better able to identify author's purpose.
- Benefits include a keener eye for analyzing texts.

With respect to learning, teachers noted that their students exhibited improvements on skills such as reading, writing, and critical thinking. More specifically, they felt that students demonstrated a greater understanding of the text through annotation and synthesis. They also felt that students were more likely to express their own opinions and make reasoned arguments about assigned readings.

Teachers noted that their students exhibited improvements on specific skills such as reading, writing, and critical thinking. In particular, students developed better skills at note taking and synthesis; they also exhibited greater rhetorical and analytical skills. The teachers felt that students were better at writing essays and improved their usage of grammar and vocabulary. Students were more likely to derive meaning from their texts and to express their own opinions or to make and defend arguments about assigned readings. Teachers responded that the curriculum helps students learn specific skills to use with any academic text in college. As one teacher cited, "Understanding argument and annotation and charting, all the techniques that are used in this kind of work [...] are going to be much more cross-applicable to all of their courses."

Throughout all of our interviews and observations, teachers continued to recognize the mismatch between what students can do at the end of high school and what is expected of them when they reach college. "The development of ERWC is just one part of a process of trying to address that mismatch," said one teacher/department chair. ERWC addresses a "total misalignment between the English 12 curriculum and what's going on at 4-year schools. It's absurd that it's continued this way as long as it did so that 12th grade was allowed to languish," noted a curriculum advisor who trains her teachers at weekly meetings on more advanced ways to use a rhetorical approach to reading and writing that embeds the ERWC modules and strategies.

Teachers across the board recognized that traditional literature-based curricula do not prepare students for reading, analyzing, and making sense of the expository reading and writing required in college. "ERWC introduces students to different kinds of expository texts and teaches them strategic ways to analyze the text," said one second-year teacher. "Because we're not just using fiction, and we're using the nonfiction texts, the kids are getting exposed to these things; I think they're going to show up on the college doorsteps as complete rock stars, where they're able to tackle challenging texts that our kids before, definitely the last couple of years, haven't," said another teacher who uses the curriculum with her 10th and 11th graders.

The Power of Reading Rhetorically

Reading rhetorically entails attending to how an author makes meaning and his or her overall purpose, in addition to the content of the text. By reading rhetorically, students learn how authors

structure an argument, a research paper, or a lab report. They learn how authors position published texts and their own writing within an academic conversation (Bean, Chappell, & Gillam, 2007).

Teachers praised the curriculum for enabling students to find ways to work through expository text, from prereading activities, to annotating while they read, to identifying the kinds of arguments writers make and the evidence they use to back their claims. Teachers pointed to specific improvements in student writing as a result of ERWC, such as supporting arguments with evidence. “They’re getting better at providing examples drawn from the text to support their opinions,” said one teacher who was using the curriculum for the first time.

Teachers believed students are moving away from formulaic answers and writing and now know how to organize their essays. With strategies such as say–mean–matter (Blau, 1993), rereading, quick-writes, and generating interaction between schemata and texts (or GIST), students can now distinguish between what the author says and the reader’s interpretation of overall meaning. Strategies that prompt students to read rhetorically not only enhance comprehension, they elicit academic writing, for students begin to synthesize and analyze expository texts. These approaches mirror expectations for college-level composition.

One teacher who has taught seniors for the past 20 years believes ERWC and its approach are “a godsend.” She has studied rhetorical reading and writing and even cotaught her senior English class with a college composition teacher for 2 years. She described how her students for years struggled in college because they would just provide their opinions. Her colleague helped her realize that college professors “want them to come in read something, view something, and then go to that text, visual, or otherwise and support their ideas with evidence from the text. ERWC does that.” She adds that her students are empowered with the skills they learn. “That to me is the epiphany that they have—that they really have more power than they’ve been led to believe they have. When they can go back to the text and give examples to support an opinion or statement. When they own that, all of a sudden you see them wanting to be more engaged.”

Another experienced senior teacher said,

This year being a presidential election, we were talking rhetoric. Something the students never really thought of before, so now they’re looking at ethos and pathos; let’s watch Obama and McCain. What do you think? Now it wasn’t just a question of let’s watch the political campaign; let’s watch it as rhetoric and see how these people are making their point. Are they using ethos? Are they using pathos? Kids that I really think heretofore would not really be interested in that were saying, “Wow did you see, that was really ethos the way he used that.” It was palpable, you could see the response.

In summary, the data show that the curriculum provides techniques that strengthen a student’s ability to read critically through an analysis of text and context. Perhaps most importantly, teachers believe that these skills transfer beyond the high school classroom. As we illustrate in the following section, teachers argue that the rhetorical techniques that students acquire serve them well in college.

The Impact of the Curriculum on College Preparedness

During interviews, the teachers praised the program for helping them understand the literacy skills that colleges value and being able to share that knowledge with their students. Teachers shared how

previously they would have students read a text and answer questions at the end, whereas with ERWC, they now have the structure of prereading, reading, postreading, prewriting, writing and postwriting. They spend more time with each piece and they go back and reread. “They are learning things they haven’t learned before,” said one teacher.

The teachers wanted their students to be able to learn reading and writing strategies that can be generalized and used with any text. Their goal was to prepare the students to perform well in college. For example, one teacher talked about rereading as a strategy that is new for students. He said, “Another thing that works with this class is that when we reread in class. The first time, I said, ‘Let’s read it again.’ They are like, ‘We just already read it once.’ I was like, ‘We are going to read it again tomorrow.’ They are like, ‘Okay.’ It will be different tomorrow.”

Teachers pointed to specific improvements in student writing as a result of ERWC, such as supporting arguments with evidence. “They’re getting better at providing examples drawn from the text to support their opinions,” said one teacher who was using the curriculum for the first time. Teachers said that students come back from taking tests and thank them for teaching them the principles to explain arguments and give examples.

Several teachers related stories of their graduates returning to describe their successes in college. One experienced teacher said, “That is my joy. Not only have they come back, but they will ask if they can speak to the class, and I revel in that, and they will say, ‘Do you know I was in the freshman comp class at San Diego State, and I was the only one that knew the terms?’” Another teacher shared a letter from a former student who had been in her ERWC class. The student was then a college student at a university in Massachusetts and wrote her teacher thanking her for her help in the class. In her letter, she notes:

I just wanted to let you know how much your class helped me. Now at college, I am aware that the type of essays, annotating and other skills you taught me were the exact foundation necessary to succeed in college. Honestly, annotating the reading is the real must! The materials and skills you taught us have helped me in so many ways—I feel you deserve some of the credit for my straight As this past semester.

Another related a comment from a college freshman who told him, “I couldn’t believe it. My college class was exactly like your class. I was like the smartest person in class. I was raising my hand. The teacher said, ‘Who knows what ethos, logos, pathos [are]?’ I raised my hand. ‘Who knows how to chart? Who knows how to write a précis?’ I knew all that stuff.” He added, “And others will return and say, ‘You know, I hated charting, but now I chart everything, and now I understand everything; I know an argument.’”

The data indicate that students transfer knowledge and skills across distinct contexts. The structure of ERWC, with its continuous focus on textual analysis and its integrated approach to reading and writing, appears to give students an understanding of *how* and *when* to apply the skills academic readers and writers use. This knowledge stems from practicing specific strategies repeatedly. For example, teachers explicitly and repeatedly instruct students to annotate texts, and the practice seems to pay off at the college level, where interrogative reading approaches are necessary.

Discussion

Since 1997, reducing the need for remedial courses has been an ongoing priority for the state of California and CSU. Serving 450,000 students on its 23 campuses, CSU finds that about 50% of its entering freshmen must take remedial courses before qualifying for freshman English. The ERWC shows promise in increasing student readiness for college coursework and in reducing the need for remediation. Results of past research, as well as this study, suggest that the curriculum can be effective. Findings show that facilitating a shift from narrative reading and writing instruction to expository reading and writing instruction should be a clear goal; however, there are ongoing challenges.

Throughout all of the site visits and observations, most teachers reported that 1 year of this type of course is not enough. Students need more time to develop their writing skills. Strategies for reading and writing expository text should be carefully and clearly scaffolded into the high school curriculum. “I’ve seen major gains with ERWC,” stated one teacher, yet, “In some ways, if I had to critique my own success this year, it’s that my students are not independent readers, critical thinkers at this point. And I fear for them in college, they’re not good rewriters, revisers of their own writing; they don’t take pride in what they write.”

The teachers believed that this process takes time, which is the reason that some high school sites use the modules in all grades, not just in 12th grade. Some teachers shared their loneliness in using the program. “Our other teachers are wedded to what they know and our site doesn’t yet require the program for all 12th graders,” stated one teacher. Several others confirmed that experience.

The study itself has limitations. One is the moderate response rate to the teacher web survey of 22%—but similar surveys were given statewide to teachers for several years, and results in other years were similar. Another limitation is that the study used purposive sampling of districts and schools; thus, the results may be more positive than if a random sample had been used.

In addition, the implementation of the curriculum was hard to track in large districts like Los Angeles. The major weakness in fully implementing the curriculum appeared to be variance in the amount of writing required by teachers. Observational and interview data indicated that some teachers do not incorporate all of the stages, including prewriting, writing, and postwriting. Finally, because each module may have taken 2 to 4 weeks to complete, the only assessment (a summative essay) was placed at the end of the module. Teacher interview data indicated a need for formative assessment. We concluded that the project should have incorporated formative assessments for the teachers to use in the middle of the modules.

Despite these challenges and limitations, data show that the ERWC curriculum and its materials demonstrate strong impacts on teachers’ instructional practice and increase student confidence and knowledge of college expectations. Teacher knowledge and practices impact students’ engagement and eventually impact student learning. Learning is demonstrated in better reading and writing skills and improved critical thinking. In addition, students in the course learn strategies that can be generalized and used in other courses. The ongoing challenge is to work with high schools to ensure that more students are leaving well-prepared for college or career and are able to avoid costly remediation.

Conclusion

Studies that analyze high school course-taking patterns point to the impact of curriculum on college readiness. Finkelstein, Huang, and Fong (2010) looked at 44,813 transcripts and identified patterns of course taking by English language learners (ELLs). They found that ELLs had significantly lower enrollment and completion rates in math and English courses compared to non-ELLs and showed greater difficulty fulfilling CSU entrance requirements. The authors concluded that early access to college preparatory coursework in English and math is critical to keeping students on track to fulfilling college entrance requirements. Hafner, Saint Germain, and Cline (2012) showed that the type of English courses students took predicted other aspects of college readiness, and that the amount of essay writing required in these courses strongly predicted how well-prepared students felt for college.

If the decision of CSU to disenroll students after 15 months of remediation signals a trend in higher education, it is imperative that we look at the rigor of the high school curriculum. The CCSS begins to set benchmarks for courses with standards that require the reading and subsequent analysis of informational texts. ERWC fits well with this initiative.

Given the findings of this study, specifically the impact of the curriculum on students' abilities to transfer skills, it may be instructive to use data from a large nationally representative database to examine English course taking nationwide and its effect on students' college readiness in the areas of reading and writing.

CSU has recently responded to some of the critiques of the curriculum. Because teachers complained about the modules being repetitive and out of date, staff and participating teachers have created new modules and incorporated them into the curriculum. CSU now provides additional online modules for teachers' use. Some teachers also complained that the curriculum only had a summative assessment: an essay done at the end of each module. In response to this criticism, CSU has created formative assessments for teachers to use midway through the module. Finally, in reaction to data that indicated the need for additional time to teach expository reading and writing skills, CSU rolled out 20 new modules for grades 7–11. All new modules are aligned with CCSS. This response is an important recognition that secondary coursework must be aligned with college expectations as early as middle school.

Another new regulation involves the use of ERWC. Previously, students could skip remedial English in college if they scored above a cut point on one of several standardized tests including the SAT, ACT, CSU English Placement Test, or the state-level CA Standards Test–enhanced (CST). If students only passed the CST test provisionally (slightly below the cut point), they still had to take a remedial class. The regulation, passed by the CSU in 2012, allows students to skip remedial English if they obtained a provisional pass on the CST, if they take an AP English class, an IB English class or an ERWC. Our study indicates that this additional step goes a long way in preparing students for the complex reading and writing tasks required at the college level.

Our data show that teachers believe ERWC helps students read rhetorically, and our findings suggest that an expository reading and writing curriculum strengthens college readiness for students. Students need to read critically, synthesize texts, and incorporate evidence into their writing. ERWC reinforces the strategies necessary to wield these skills. Given the national focus on college- and career-ready English standards at the secondary level and the universities' move away from explicit remediation, the ERWC is a model to investigate further.

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