

Successful Transitions to College: An English Language Arts K-12/Higher Education Partnership

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Data collected from a regional collaborative professional development project consisting of Eastern Washington University, Community Colleges of Spokane, Spokane Public Schools, and area rural district English language arts faculty reveals that faculty across these sectors agree on common problems of practice. Through a reflexive process of shared inquiry, cross-sector cohorts' investigation of English Language Arts Common Core State Standards and higher education composition outcomes identified students' abilities to navigate the connection between reading and writing, or more specifically, rhetoric, as the prominent gap in students' successful transition from high school English to college composition.

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, a collection of approximately 50 mathematics and English language arts (ELA) faculty members from Eastern Washington University, Community Colleges of Spokane, Spokane Public Schools, and rural school districts—Deer Park, Cheney, Columbia (Stevens), Lind-Ritzville, Mead, and West Valley (Spokane)—began a sustained collaborative professional development project titled “Successful Transitions to College: Collaboration for Alignment to the Common Core State Standards” (STC). This project enhances important work across regional Washington K-12 and higher education institutions by strengthening the K-20 alignment of ELA and mathematics curriculum and instruction across the schools and colleges; facilitating K-12 and higher education faculty members working together on full implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS); and ensuring that far greater numbers of the region’s students, especially low-income students, smoothly transition from high school to college.

STC created a professional network that allows cross-sector collaboration to take hold over time as regional educational leaders work together on identified issues of curricular and instructional alignment. Specifically, the project provides time and resources for faculty members to develop, research, test, and apply solutions to shared problems of practice across institutions. This effort is informed by current scholarship promoting changes to teaching practices across sectors in order to more effectively support students in the transition from high school to college (Conley, 2012). The approach has also been shaped by current research on best practices in the development of both professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009) and Networked

Improvement Communities (Bryk, et al., 2011). With the Washington adoption of CCSS, with a strong cooperative spirit in place, and with effective collaboration, regional high school and college mathematics and ELA educators were provided a unique opportunity to share their deep concerns and to accelerate student gains in mathematics and ELA achievement. STC has high but achievable goals for both ELA and mathematics, including lower rates of student placement into developmental courses, higher student pass-rates in college-level classes, and the collaborative faculty development of a repository of instructional resources. In years two and three, cohorts will research, design, and iteratively implement and revise specific curricular resources for use across sectors. This article, though, focuses exclusively on first-year results from the ELA portion of the project and indicates the ways that these results will shape project activities for years two and three.

Methods: Relationship, Collaboration, and Production

To support faculty in accomplishing the aims of this project throughout the three years, we employed two main strands of research: professional learning communities and adult cognitive motivational learning theories. Research and methods found in the literature connected to professional learning communities grounded and informed our constructivist and collaborative approach to our work (Annenberg, 2004; Wenger 1998). In this approach, collaborators work together to 1) define a problem of practice; 2) reach agreement on goals; 3) generate solutions; and 4) systematically test and gather evidence on the efficacy of these solution. Research in adult learning theories (Brookfield, 1988; Trivette, et al, 2009) and cognitive motivational theories (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) were used to create optimal conditions for educators to share expertise and collaborate in ways that are highly productive. Year one project activities included creating cohesive cohort groups involved in defining specific problems of practice and reaching agreement on goals. Years two and three will focus on enabling those cohort groups to generate solutions and iteratively test and improve those solutions.

Professional learning cohorts composed of regional high school, college, and university ELA faculty were established at the outset of the project. Cohorts were developed intentionally to include ELA teachers from both rural and urban low-income school districts, 4-year university composition faculty, and 2-year community college faculty. Table 1 provides the ELA STC institution and participant details.

Table 1: STC ELA Participant Breakdown

Participant Institutions	Number of Teacher Participants	Percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015)
Eastern Washington University	6	N/A
Community Colleges of Spokane	6	N/A
Spokane Public Schools	5	57.8%

Deer Park School District	1	48.3%
Cheney School District	3	47.9%
Columbia (Stevens) School District	1	71.5%
Lind-Ritzville School District	1	50.0%
Mead School District	1	30.6%

Initially, participants took part in a collaborative protocol process focusing on evidence-based skills and content around critical thinking, reading, and writing to examine the alignment of their existing classroom practices to the ELA CCSS, specifically, the Career and College Ready Anchor Standards for Writing (Writing Standards) and the Career and College Ready Anchor Standards for Reading (Reading Standards). In addition, participants compared the Writing Standards and Reading Standards, which are focused on problem-solving, research, and reasoning skills, to the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s (WPA) Outcomes Statement for First-Year Writing, which focus on rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, critical reading, critical composing, writing processes, and knowledge of conventions.

With this grounding in the standards of the various sectors, cohorts then used a specific observation protocol to visit each other’s classrooms and to determine shared issues on which to focus. Teachers observed and described evidence of students’ understanding of learning objectives and expectations, as well as identified opportunities for students to gain the necessary skills to meet those objectives and expectations. Observations included noting how the skills expected of students in the classroom environment they observed differed from expectations in their own classroom environment—high school instructors visited 2-year and 4-year classrooms, 2-year faculty visited high school classrooms and 4-year classrooms, and so on. Through these protocol processes, each of the ELA cohorts continued to narrow to a particular focus, derived from a common problem of practice. The observation protocol asked participants to identify the skills and demands students face in each environment. Approaching these classroom observations from the student perspective helped participants avoid feeling “graded” on their teaching and, instead, opened conversation about the inherent challenges students face within every classroom.

Results: College-Ready and College-Level Standards in Relation to STC Findings

Analysis of the STC participants’ collaborative cross-sector inquiry of their own practices related to the Writing Standards and Reading Standards led to common problems of practice across all three sectors: 1) the ability to engage effectively at every stage in the composing process, 2) the ability to critically read a range of texts, and 3) the ability to effectively use appropriate sources, integrating outside texts with original written content. The subsequent comparison of the Writing Standards and Reading Standards with the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition revealed that standards at both the K-12 and college level address many of the same gaps in student knowledge and practice. That is, there are significant areas of overlap between

the two sets of standards, requiring K-12 teachers and college faculty to focus instruction on a similar set of skills and disciplinary content. Just as K-12 and college level participants in STC identified problems of practice that were common across sectors, K-12 and college level Writing Standards and Reading Standards focus on common gaps in student knowledge and practice.

The collaborative analysis of learning standards demonstrates that each of these major, cross-sector problems of practice identified by STC participants are also key areas of focus for *both* K-12 and college level literacy standards, as represented by the Writing Standard, Reading Standards, WPA Outcomes Statement, respectively. That is, both sets of standards devote considerable attention and language to all three of the common issues in the teaching and learning of ELA identified by the STC participants. That the problems of practice identified by STC participants, based on their classroom experiences, are also addressed in these K-12 *and* college standards, suggests that these are indeed three key areas of concern that lead to ongoing, shared challenges for instructors and their students in the transition from high school to college. There is, perhaps, no better place to go for evidence that these specific problems of practice are common across sectors than the teachers who use these standards and outcomes. The organic and collaborative process that cohort groups engaged in to identify common problems of practice validates the authors’ own independent analysis.

Further, the authors’ own analysis and comparison of the Writing Standards, Reading Standards, and WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition confirms and validates the identification of these three central problems of practice in ELA instructions across sectors:

- the composing process
- critical reading, and
- the use of sources.

The tables below, derived from the authors’ analysis of both K-12 and college-level standards, demonstrate the shared concern over, and similar articulation of, these three key problems of practice.

Table 2: The Composing Process

CCSS ELA Anchor Standards for Writing	WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.	Develop a writing project through multiple drafts Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, reviewing, collaborating, revising, rewriting, rereading, and editing

Table 2 shows that both sets of standards (Common Core State Standards, 2010; WPA Outcomes Statement, 2014) related to the composing process are grounded in the conception of writing as a recursive process, dependent on situation, purpose, and audience, which is a foundational assumption within literacy studies across the K-16 continuum (Calkins et al., 2012).

Table 3: Critical Reading

CCSS ELA Anchor Standards for Reading	WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC
<p>Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.</p>	<p>Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations</p>

Table 3 illuminates how the two sets of standards (Common Core State Standards, 2010; WPA Outcomes Statement, 2014) related to critical reading require that students critically read a wide range of texts, with a particular focus on the relationship between claims and evidence. This indicates that, to be successful in the transition from high school to college, students need to receive instruction on how to read complex academic texts, along with practice doing so, at both the high school *and* college level.

Table 4: Use of Sources

CCSS ELA Anchor Standards for Writing	WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC
<p>Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.</p>	<p>Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources Use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources</p>

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.	
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In Table 4, both the K-12 and college standards (Common Core State Standards, 2010; WPA Outcomes Statement, 2014) related to the use of sources include a focus on the location, evaluation, and use of appropriate textual evidence to inform and support the production of informational and argumentative texts.

Overwhelmingly, participants in all three sectors agreed that the overlap areas, also evident in the above analysis of learning standards from both K-12 and higher education, were significant problems of practice at each educational level; this agreement indicated the need for a systematic progression of pedagogical tools and classroom interventions to help students increasingly build their confidence and competence in these behaviors and skills. Based on this foundational work, cohorts identified specific areas of focus for further research and inquiry:

- Developing students’ abilities to independently discover and apply applicable processes when they encounter literacy situations in various classes.
- Helping students provide objective summaries of academic texts.
- Developing students’ annotation skills in order to use texts as a means of increasing their experience/expertise.
- Encouraging students to read critically in order to distinguish between their own thinking and the thinking of the author; using critical reading strategies to help students make deeper connections with texts and effectively use texts in their writing.
- Developing a shared, cross-sector understanding of the difference between college ready reading and college level reading, in order to ensure that expectations and instructional approaches are aligned.

An examination of both the more general, major problems of practice and the more specific topics of focus identified by the cohorts point to single topic of shared interest across sectors: *the connection between reading and writing*. We believe that this issue can best be understood and addressed by attention to a major gap between high school standards and practice and college level standards and practice: *the issue of rhetoric*. For the purposes of this article, rhetoric can be understood as a framework for the effective practice of critical reading and critical writing, as well as a means for articulating the relationship between the two, via the consideration of purpose, audience, and situation.

Discussion: Rhetoric as a Gap in HS to College ELA Instruction

This relationship between critical reading and critical writing relates directly to results found by cohorts. Our analysis of the problems of practice identified by STC participants suggests that much of the concern in the field around student preparedness is focused on the ability of students to effectively connect the reading of texts to their own production of texts. Higher education writing instruction has typically overlooked critical reading, and addressing the problem of reading is relatively new in post-secondary composition classes (Horning, 2007; Jamieson, 2013). The ability to critically read is a focus of two of the three key, general problems of

practice identified by participants: critical reading was itself identified as an area of concern, as was the ability of students to integrate outside texts with their own writing—an activity that is dependent upon critical reading. Finally, the composing process inherently requires the ability to critically read one’s own writing.

All of the more specific areas of inquiry identified by cohorts also included an emphasis on the essential connection between reading and writing. Two of the five research topics explicitly focus on critical reading skills. Two other topics of inquiry focus on writing activities that are closely connected to reading—summary and annotation. The remaining research topic is focused on the adaptability of students in differing literacy situations, which would include both reading and writing.

The connection between reading and writing is particularly important to the successful transition from high school English to college composition (Jamieson, 2013; Horning, 2007). This is due in part to the fact that students must, when they enter college, learn to engage with the academic discourse community, an entity with which first-year students traditionally have had little in-depth experience (Lea & Street, 2006). Participation in the academic discourse community requires that students are able to critically read texts from a range of disciplines, and respond effectively in writing in response to those texts. The shift in the CCSS to focus on the “[r]eading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational,” (Common Core State Standards, 2010) can be understood as an effort to address this transitional challenge before students enter college.

The key, however, to effectively addressing and providing instruction that enables students to connect their reading and writing process is a concept that represents perhaps the biggest actual gap between high school and college standards: rhetoric. The concept and discipline of rhetoric is foundational to the field of college writing and literacy, which is in fact traditionally known as “Composition and Rhetoric” at the post-secondary level. A comparison of the K-12 Writing Standards and Reading Standards with college writing standards reveals that, although conceptually included at a surface level, the term rhetoric, a key focus of the WPA Outcomes Statement, is absent in the K-12 level standards.

We argue that explicit instruction in and practice of rhetorical principles is key to effectively addressing the connection between reading and writing at both the high school and college level. The practice of rhetoric requires the reader/writing to consider the situation, purpose, and audience when reading *and/or* writing. For example, as noted above, findings from the STC participants suggest that students struggle with integrating outside texts and their own writing; this a key essential to the effective participation in the academic discourse community. In other words, students often attempt to move from reading a text to writing about that text without taking into account the contexts, purposes, and audience expectations that inform what was read and what will be written. The antidote to this problem of practice is the study of rhetoric. Rhetoric provides a systematic means for students to effectively consider as they attempt to enter the scholarly conversation, the contexts, the expectations, the purposes, and audience that inform what they read and what they then write in response.

Conclusion

Rhetorical instruction and practice at the college *and* high school level is key to effectively addressing the central problems of practice in the transition from K-12 to college. Moving forward, STC participants will engage in the systematic study of selected research-based curriculum materials related to rhetoric and aligned to the CCSS and the WPA Outcomes Statement. They will continue to work collaboratively in their cross-sector cohorts to gain a shared understanding of the expectations for students' performance as they transition from high school ELA to college composition. Research-based course activities and assignments, again focusing on rhetorical practices, will be designed jointly, (or when adapted from elsewhere, will be explored and studied jointly), and faculty will collect data and collaborate on the review of samples of students' work from all sectors. In this way, faculty from high schools, community colleges, and the university will better understand the expectations placed on students in all sectors. Collaboration on this work will inform participants of differing expectations among sectors, facilitate identification of gaps in the curriculum within and among sectors, and allow faculty to work together across sectors to better assist students in successfully transitioning from high to college. Importantly, the organic and collaborative model of professional development used in the STC project ensures buy-in by faculty across sectors and respects faculty across sectors as equal responsible partners in improving student success.

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