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# “What the Hell is Revise?”: Student Approaches to Coursework in Developmental English at one Urban-Serving Community College

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“What the Hell is Revise?”: Student Approaches to Coursework in  
Developmental English at one Urban-Serving Community College

by

Stefan A. Perun

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy

Seton Hall University

May 2014

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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES  
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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Doctoral Candidate, Stefan A. Perun, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ph.D. during this Spring Semester 2014.

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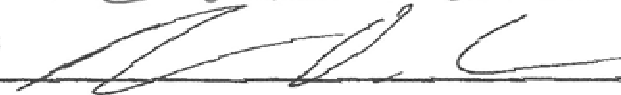
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## ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this dissertation was to help illuminate why most students who enroll in developmental English at community colleges never make it to a college-level course. The extant literature suggests that students' learning experiences in a course largely account for success or failure, yet few studies have uncovered how students experience content and pedagogy in developmental English at community colleges, and how these experiences shape students' success or failure in their course. To remedy this gap, I conducted a semester-long, classroom level, qualitative study of three sections of developmental English at one community college. I primarily relied upon participant observations and interviews to uncover details about the pedagogy enacted in the classrooms, how students responded to the pedagogy, and how their responses shaped success or failure. During the course of the semester, I observed 58 classroom sessions, interviewed the three instructors and a sample of 23 students from the three classes. Additionally, I collected over 100 pages of course documents handed out to students (i.e. syllabi, assignment sheets, quizzes, tests, rubrics, etc.). I coded the field notes from the classroom observations, the interview transcripts, and the documents. Analysis focused upon three main analytic themes: High School Comparisons (students' understanding of their developmental English coursework compared to their high school coursework), Students' Strategies (students' approaches to passing the course), and Teaching/Learning Literacy Practices (explicit how-to direction from professors about college-level reading and/or writing). Using an analytic induction process I entered the coded observational, interview, and memo data into a matrix display to understand the similarities and differences in how students' approached their coursework, how these approaches changed during the semester, and to what extent their approaches shaped success or failure. To understand how these approaches interacted with or

were shaped by pedagogy, I compared the summary finding and individual students' experiences from the data display to the corresponding observational, professor interview, and course documents data. The findings suggest that students' initial approaches to their developmental English assignments were developed through their urban K-12 school experiences where passing grades were given for simply submitting assignments (usually worksheets students found unchallenging) by the end of a marking period. The sample of 23 who participated in interviews described how they initially used a similar approach for the writing assignments in their developmental English course; they quickly essayed their thoughts and submitted their assignments without revision. When this approach resulted in failure, students were surprised to fail and disoriented by their professor requirement to "revise." For the 18 students who reported passing at least the composition portion of their course, success was essentially a matter of developing the capacity to revise an unacceptable draft of an essay assignment into a satisfactory one. The students' adoption of a new approach to writing essays focused on revision hinged upon their professor's feedback and requirement to revise and resubmit the essay assignments. Five students reported that they were never able to revise their essays in ways that met with their professor's expectations. Their difficulties seemed to stem, at least in part, from continuing to approach their writing assignments as they did their high school coursework. I conclude the dissertation with discussion of the theoretical, practical, and policy implications of these findings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing anything worth reading cannot be accomplished without tremendous help. This seems particularly true for a dissertation. Accordingly, I wish to thank everyone who contributed to the project. Foremost, I want to thank my committee, Dr. Cox, Dr. Stetar, and Dr. Sattin-Bajaj for all of their time, input, and help. I want to especially thank Dr. Cox for introducing me to the problem I investigated, and teaching me the gold standard of qualitative research.

I would also like to acknowledge all of my colleagues in the program at Seton Hall who read and commented on multiple drafts of my proposal and chapters of my dissertation, and served as sounding boards for me as I thought through the ideas expressed in this dissertation.

This project would have not been possible without the three courageous and reflective developmental English professors who invited me into their classrooms to conduct the study. I am grateful for the opportunity, and I hope the results are useful to their craft.

Similarly, all of the students I observed and the 23 students I interviewed treated me like a valued classmate, offering to help me in my academic pursuits. Their experiences, candor, and insights motivated me to be a better student, researcher, and teacher.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Community colleges represent the single largest segment of U.S. higher education, enrolling 46.7% (or 7.13 million) of all public higher education students in the fall of 2011 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). Students seeking a degree or credential who enroll in community colleges tend to be non-White, from low socioeconomic status (SES) families, and much more likely to be deemed underprepared for college when compared to their 4-year counterparts (Horn & Nevill, 2006). In fact, Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) estimated that 58% of students who graduated high school in 1992, and attended a community college before 2000, were deemed underprepared and enrolled in at least one pre-college-level reading, writing, or math course.

Although there is variation across and within states, the typical process for placement in pre-college level courses is determined by a student's score on a placement test. The test is usually either ACT's COMPASS or the College Board's ACCUPLACER, which include standardized sections on reading comprehension, grammar, mathematics, and essay prompts. The cutoff scores are intended to sort students by ability, predicting which students would or would not be successful in college-level coursework. After taking the placement test, students could be placed as many as three levels below college-level depending upon cutoff score thresholds and the pre-college course structure at their community college.

Pre-college level courses in which students enroll are generally referred to in the research literature and at community colleges as developmental, remedial, or basic skills education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The nomenclature used to refer to pre-college level courses in higher education is highly problematic. The phrases used to refer to these courses, and the students who enroll in them, shapes the understanding of professors, students and administrators to negative ends. For

Oftentimes, researchers use developmental or remedial education interchangeably to refer to these courses (see for example Bailey, 2009). I use the term *developmental education* throughout this dissertation because this is how these courses are referred to at the research site.

Research evidence suggests that developmental education can help students who are deemed underprepared develop the skills necessary for success in college. In fact, students who enroll in developmental education, successfully complete their developmental course(s), and enroll in a college-level course have the same or better chance of transfer and/or degree attainment as students who were deemed prepared (i.e. Bahr, 2008, 2010a; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008). For example, Bahr (2008) assessed students enrolled in the California community college system and compared the credential attainment or transfer of students in developmental math to students who were deemed prepared for college-level math. The students who passed their developmental math course(s) and enrolled in a college-level course had the same transfer/degree attainment as those deemed prepared. Accordingly, Bahr concluded that, “remedial math programs are highly effective at resolving skill deficiencies” (p. 421).

However, most students who enroll in developmental education never make it to a college-level course. In Bahr’s (2008) sample less than a quarter (24.6%) of students enrolled in

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example, Shaughnessy (1977) has argued that the phrase “remedial education” refers to the students who need a “remedy” for their “sickness” or “disease” of being underprepared. Fox (1990) has argued that “developmental education” is equally problematic because it refers to students who are somehow immature and not ready for college. These authors, and others (i.e. Bartholomae, 1993), have instead (hesitantly) used the terms “basic skills education” as it does not implicate the students as being “sick” or “underdeveloped,” but more generically “stuck” at some level (Fox, 1990). Regardless, as Bartholomae (1993) has argued, all of these terms are equally problematic because they create and institutionalize categories of normal and abnormal. While I acknowledge how problematic all of these terms are, I use the term developmental education throughout the dissertation because this is how these courses are referred to at the research site.

developmental math made it to a college-level course. Bailey (2009) found a similar pattern in both developmental English and math across the country. Using the national Achieving the Dream database, Bailey estimated that more than half (56%) of community college students who enrolled in any developmental education course did not enroll in a college-level course within 3 years. Follow-up research using the same database suggested that most students failed out or withdrew (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Only between 8% and 11% of students passed their developmental course(s) and never returned to their community college (Bailey et al., 2010).

The available evidence from large-scale survey research suggests that developmental education is disproportionately negative for non-White, low SES students from weak educational backgrounds (e.g. Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2010b; Bailey et al., 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009). For example, Attewell et al. (2006) found in their analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) that only after controlling for race/ethnicity, family SES, and educational background (measured by high school curriculum intensity, highest math taken in high school, 12th grade reading and math test scores, and 12th grade class rank, among others) are students in developmental education as likely to achieve a credential or transfer as students who were initially deemed prepared.

In another example, Bettinger and Long (2009) exploited wide variations in placement test cutoff scores across Ohio community colleges and found that the positive effects for enrollment in developmental education erode for students who scored well below the cutoff. After controlling for race/ethnicity, family income, and high school performance (high school GPA, high school rank, and ACT scores) the positive effects (degree/transfer) of developmental education enrollment were mostly for students who were as likely to be deemed prepared and enrolled in a college-level course. As the researchers narrowed their sample on these so called

“marginal students,” the effect size increased, suggesting that non-White, low SES students with low high school GPAs were least likely to earn a degree or transfer after enrolling in developmental education.

The disproportionately negative impact for non-White, low SES students with weak educational backgrounds appears to stem from the fact that they are more likely to enroll in multiple levels of developmental education. For example, Bahr (2010a) assessed the relationship between a range of student-level data and success in developmental math courses across the California community college system. Whereas students’ SES and high school preparation were poor predictors of success in developmental math courses, race/ethnicity was a strong predictor of students’ persistence to a college-level course. More specifically, Bahr found that African Americans and Latinos were much less likely to pass their developmental math sequence and enroll in a college-level math courses because they were more likely to enroll in the lowest level of developmental math (three below college).

The research suggests that developmental education is particularly unhelpful for students who are referred to multiple levels of developmental coursework, and the students in that category tend to be non-White, low income, and have low high school GPAs. It stands to reason that students who earned low high school GPAs and/or came from high schools that did not prepare them for the college-level coursework would be least likely to successfully develop the skills necessary for success in their developmental course(s) and beyond. However, other evidence suggests that students’ race/ethnicity, SES, and academic background are not entirely predictive of success or failure in developmental education.

Bailey et al. (2010) found that students deemed underprepared by their community college were significantly more likely to complete their first college-level course if they ignored

their developmental referral and enrolled in a college-level course.<sup>2</sup> Seventy-two percent (72%) of the students who ignored their math or reading placement successfully completed a college-level course (a rate lower than the students who successfully passed their developmental course(s)). Only 27% of the students who enrolled in the recommended developmental course successfully completed a college-level course. The only empirically observable difference between the two groups was that students who skipped their developmental referral actually enrolled in a college-level course. The findings suggest that attrition is largely accounted for by *enrollment* in developmental education, regardless of race/ethnicity, SES, or educational background.

The research is fairly conclusive that developmental education is broken. Most of the students who enroll never make it to a college-level course (Bailey, 2009). Yet it seems that as many as 72% of all students who are enrolled in developmental education could pass a college-level course (Bailey et al., 2010). Presumably this means that they could pass their developmental course(s), too. The widespread failure in developmental education presents a serious barrier to students who aspire to earn a college credential. Moreover, the high level of attrition resulting from this problem poses difficulties for achieving either institutional or national college completion goals.

The attrition among the subset of students enrolled in developmental English seems particularly problematic. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that students enrolled in developmental math are much less likely to successfully pass the course if they are underprepared for English (Bahr, 2007). While math is no less important to earning a college degree

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<sup>2</sup> Students can only ignore their developmental referral where state or local policies allow. Parsad, Lewis, and Greene (2003) estimate that about 25% of all community colleges have such policies.

(particularly in math intensive fields), college-level English skills (namely reading and writing) are precursors to success in all disciplines, including math. Moreover, for the large swath of students who have earned a high school diploma or the equivalency and cannot enroll in a college-level English course, developmental English represents a last chance for these students to develop the reading and writing skills necessary to navigate college, citizenship, and life.

### **Locating the Problem in the Developmental English Classroom**

To date, large scale survey research has not shed much light on how or why enrollment in developmental English might prove deleteriously for so many students. The decontextualized nature of large-scale survey data is insufficient to illuminate why and how students come to fail, withdraw, or discontinue enrollment because the data do not capture the students' experiences and how those experiences shape outcomes. For example, Attewell et al.'s (2006) analysis of NELS:88 led the researchers to conclude that "low family SES, poor high school preparation, and being Black" are "causal factors" for students enrolled in developmental education not progressing toward a credential and/or transfer (p. 905). However, their study only found a correlation between these student attributes and the observed outcomes, their methods do not support a causal claim. As importantly, their evidence only indicated who was most likely to enroll in developmental education and least likely to benefit; the research did not illuminate why these students never make it to a college-level course.

Other literature on developmental education draws upon higher education research focused on student engagement and retention (i.e. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) to illuminate descriptive accounts of successful developmental education programs at various community colleges (i.e. Boylan, 2002; Boylan, Bonham, & Tafari, 2005). This literature generally suggests that centrally organized developmental education, mandatory enrollment,



learning communities, counseling, and “wrap around” academic services, including academic success courses and mandatory tutoring, help improve student success. All of these interventions have merit. In fact, there appears to be consensus that the more clearly the students’ trajectory is defined for them, the more contact students have with their community college, and the more help they receive to pass their developmental courses, the more likely they are to persist to a college-level course.

However, the fact that these interventions improved some measure of student success at a focal community college does not suggest that the lack of the intervention under evaluation is why students do not make it to a college-level course. Moreover, the literature largely ignores the central aspect of students’ success or failure, namely their learning experiences in the classroom.

Teaching and learning, in any setting, take place through a social process in pedagogical relationships between learners and teachers (Ramsden, 2003). Course content and a professors’ pedagogical approach is based upon their disciplinary knowledge, understanding of teaching, expectations for student learning, and perceptions of students (e.g. Hillocks, 1999; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Ramsden, 2003). And, students’ learning is shaped by their disciplinary understandings, personal aims and intents, preconceived notions of teaching and learning, and experience as a student (e.g. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). This “context of learning is ever-present,” as student learning in a course is the “response to the implicit or explicit requirements of their teachers” (Ramsden, 2003, p. 64).

To learn how students meet with success or failure in a course requires understanding the content being taught, how a professor’s pedagogy helps students learn that content (or not), and how students respond to their professor’s pedagogy (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). The interactions among these three aspects of the pedagogical relationship, content, professor, and

students, are where most (if not all) educational outcomes manifest (Cohen et al., 2003; Grubb, 2010).

### **Developmental English Classroom Research**

Several scholars have uncovered a few of the interactions among content, instructors, and students that shape success or failure in developmental English at both 2 and 4-year colleges (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Fox, 1990; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991). These researchers suggest that poor outcomes are in part attributable to (a) content empty pedagogy that fails to engage students in meaningful learning (Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013), (b) professors' misinterpretations of students' responses to pedagogy, which can lead professors to inadvertently diminish students' motivation (Cox, 2009; Hull et al., 1991), (c) student's counterproductive behavior driven by their fear (Cox, 2009), and (d) the difficulty students have understanding and practicing language conventions that are unfamiliar to them (Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Fox, 1990).

Of this literature, few have entered the developmental English classroom in community colleges (e.g. Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013). Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) has consistently reported that "remedial pedagogy," or content-empty, rote-learning practices centered upon basic skill drills (i.e. grammar exercises) result in student disengagement. For example, Grubb's (2013) investigation of developmental education at 13 California community colleges detailed how many developmental professors lectured students about basic skills or sub-skills—like identifying parts of a sentence—and then assigned worksheet or workbook drills to evaluate students' mastery of the focal skill. Grubb documented students' classroom behaviors (body language, responses, etc.), and concluded that the teacher-

focused and decontextualized nature of what he calls “remedial pedagogy” was so tedious and boring for students that it promoted “the most passive form of learning,” and thus made it unlikely that any student could meaningfully engage in the course (Grubb, 2013, p. 55).

Grubb and his associates (1999) identified more engaging pedagogy whereby developmental English professors focused on reading and writing as social practices of communication (i.e. receiving and conveying meaning), rather than memorization of grammar rules. Grubb concluded that these professors, subordinate “technical issues to the larger problem of constructing meaning through writing... and the substance contributes to motivation in place of listless attention that is so obvious in drill-oriented classes” (p. 189).

Grubb’s (1999, 2010, 2013) findings suggest that remedial pedagogy leading to student disengagement accounts for part of why most students who enroll in developmental education fail or withdraw before enrolling in a college-level course. However, despite Grubb’s robust descriptions of teaching inside developmental classrooms, the conclusions he drew from his findings were based mostly upon untested assumptions about students’ learning experiences. That is, Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) never interviewed the students he observed to learn how the students experienced their course or how the pedagogy he observed shaped their success or failure. Instead, Grubb relied on observations of “listlessness” that left the actual learning experiences of students undocumented. Without understanding how the students interpreted the teaching activities and how this shaped positive or negative learning experiences it is difficult to know what connection there was between listlessness and student success or failure.

More recently, Grubb (2013) analyzed videos of 22 students who were interviewed by their classmates as part of their developmental course requirement. Grubb provided the students with general questions about their developmental education experiences to ask one another.

These student-led video interviews provided Grubb with students' perspectives that confirmed "congruence" with the perceptions he developed through classroom observations. However, without the researcher interviewing students, it is unlikely that thick descriptions about their learning experiences were elicited because students in developmental education do not likely have knowledge of or formal training in qualitative interviewing. As importantly, the interviews did not illuminate why some students met with success and others failure after similar classroom/course experiences, or how professors' pedagogical approaches ("remedial pedagogy" or not) shaped success or failure.

In contrast to Grubb's work, Cox's (2009) classroom-level investigation of mostly college-level composition courses focused on understanding students' approaches to coursework, and the ways these approaches interacted with the pedagogies enacted in their classroom. Cox found that students' fears of having their sense of inadequacy confirmed through assessment compelled them to not turn in their assignments. These students believed that failing because they did not turn in the assignments successfully preserved their ability to retake the course. In turn, the professors interpreted this fear-driven student behavior as demonstrations of cognitive or motivational deficiencies. The misunderstanding between students and professors became self-fulfilling, as professors' who did not "validate students' sense of belonging" tended to unintentionally exacerbate students' avoidance of assessments (p. 134)

Importantly, Cox reported that the students she interviewed explained how professors who came "down to [the students'] level" and attempt to reflectively understand the ways students "emotionally and cognitively" interacted with the curriculum tended to assuage students' fears and increase their success (p. 114). In fact, Cox found that professors had a positive impact by inspiring confidence, holding students to high standards, and validating

students' college-going ability. In these ways, Cox's research demonstrates the necessity of understanding how students' approach their coursework and engage the pedagogy enacted in their course in order to understand how students meet with success or failure.

Cox's research represents an important contribution to understanding one aspect of why developmental English students may never make it to a college-level course; namely, their "fear, feelings of being overwhelmed, and confusion about assignments" lead them to act in counterproductive ways (p. 161). However, Cox's research is comprised of six college-level English courses and only one developmental English course. Accordingly, the findings are coalesced mostly from students who either successfully navigated developmental education or were never deemed underprepared for college-level coursework. Thus, these insights may not hold true for the almost two-thirds of students who never make it to a college-level course. Moreover, these insights suggest that classroom level interactions are central to shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes, and thus demonstrate that pedagogy and how students respond to pedagogy remains an understudied aspect of developmental English.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The extant literature suggests that pedagogy shapes students' learning experiences, which shapes success or failure. Yet the literature largely has ignored a focused look at understanding how the interactions among content, professor, and students shape outcomes in developmental English classrooms at community colleges. The few studies that have included investigations of these classrooms either drew conclusions upon untested assumptions about students' learning experiences (i.e. Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013) or focused mostly on students who successfully navigated developmental education, or were never deemed underprepared for college-level coursework (Cox, 2009).

To remedy this gap in the literature, I sought to learn how students enrolled in three sections of developmental English at one community college experienced their course, and how their experiences shaped success or failure. More specifically, I sought to uncover what was taught in these classrooms, the pedagogical approaches professors used to teach that content, how students responded to the content and pedagogy enacted in their classroom, and how these responses shaped success or failure. In short, my objective was to understand how interactions among the content, professor, and students shaped student outcomes.

### **Research Questions**

To achieve the research objective, the following questions guided the research:

1. How do students who are enrolled in developmental English at one community college experience the content and pedagogy in their course?
2. How do students' respond to the content and pedagogy they experience in their course?
3. How does the pedagogy that students experience shape success or failure in the course?

### **The Study**

To uncover details about how students experienced their developmental English course and how their experiences shaped success or failure, I conducted a qualitative study inside three classes of developmental English at one community college. Because of my interest in the disproportionately poor outcomes for students from low SES and non-White families, I conducted my study at an urban-serving community college that serves a high proportion of low SES Black and Latino students. Central to the design of the study was the selection of three professors who (a) regularly achieved a higher than average retention and pass rates for the college and (b) avoided remedial pedagogy (i.e. grammar drills). The criteria for the latter was

essentially that the professor focused on helping students develop their abilities to read and write by having them practice reading and writing. In this regard, the professors I recruited were exceptional as the literature suggests that most developmental professors rely upon remedial pedagogy (Grubb, 2013). Accordingly, my findings provide both an illumination of best practices, as well as insights into features of students' learning experiences that shape success and failure that would have been difficult to uncover in classrooms where the most common outcome is known to be failure due to pedagogy that promotes student disengagement.

In order to understand the pedagogy of the professors, how the students experienced the pedagogy, and how they responded to the pedagogy inside these three classrooms, I relied primarily upon two qualitative strategies, participant observations and interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2009). I observed every class session of each section for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and then one class per section each week for the remainder of the semester, documenting 126 hours of classroom interactions with detailed field notes. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all three professors and a sample of 23 students from across the three classes.

Data collection resulted in field notes from 58 classroom session observations, transcripts of the instructor interviews (two interviews for each of the three instructors) and 23 student interviews, 11 analytic memos, and over 100 pages of course documents handed out to students (i.e. syllabi, assignment sheets, quizzes, tests, rubrics, etc.). I coded the entire dataset and using Miles and Huberman's (1994) "analytic induction" I entered the coded observational, interview, and memo data into a matrix display to understand the similarities and differences in how students' approached their coursework, how these approaches changed during the semester, and to what extent their approaches shaped success or failure. To understand how these approaches

interacted with pedagogy, I compared the summary finding and individual students' experiences from the data display to the corresponding observational, professor interview, and course documents data. Accordingly, I was able to learn how students responded to the explicit or implicit expectations of their professors in ways that shaped success or failure.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since most students who enroll in developmental education never make it to a college-level course, the findings from this study are significant for theory, practice, and policy intended to improve student success in these courses. First, the study contributes to the now incomplete picture of classroom-level research by providing a focused look at how students' learning experiences in developmental English shape success or failure. By illuminating this understudied aspect of attrition in developmental education, the study builds upon a growing theoretical framework of why and how students fail.

Second, theoretical contributions can be put into practice by helping developmental professors enact pedagogies that account for and meet the educational needs of their students. Moreover, the findings can contribute to the practice of teaching outside of the developmental education classroom by focusing teachers on the role of students' learning experience in achieving the learning objectives in a given course.

Third, the findings contribute to a growing body of literature that suggests that students' learning experiences are a central aspect of success and failure. In this way, the findings underscore the need for local and state-level reform policies that address the students' learning experiences in the classroom. More specifically, the findings contribute to the picture of what effective classroom-level reforms should entail.



## **Organization of the Dissertation**

In Chapter II, I review the relevant literature necessary to locate the problem of attrition in developmental English at community colleges in the classroom. To this end, I briefly review the historical context of developmental education, consider the scope and nature of community college students' participation in developmental education, develop a theoretical framework for understanding the problem as one of teaching and learning, and review the developmental English composition and education scholarship that has sought to understand how students enrolled in developmental English come to meet with success or failure.

Chapter III details the site and participant selection, methods for data collection, the approach I used to analyze the data, and how I drew conclusions.

Chapter IV presents the findings. Generally, the students I interviewed described their approach to developmental coursework (at least initially) as quickly completing assignments to turn in for passing grades. Their approach developed through urban K-12 school experiences where assignments were usually worksheets that simply required selecting correct answers, and success (a passing grade) was predicated upon turning in the completed worksheets by the end of a marking period. However, as students approached their developmental writing assignments in this way, they were surprised to fail the assignments and even more surprised that their professors required a revision. Students who adopted new approaches to their coursework that centered upon a process of revising, rather than completing an assignment quickly to turn it in, were more successful than students who were not able to develop new approaches to their coursework.

Finally, in Chapter V, I summarize the research problem, methods, and findings, and discuss the implications for research, practice, and policy. Generally, I synthesize the findings in

the larger context of the qualitative literature, and suggest that developmental professors need to explicitly explain to students how they should approach their coursework to meet the expectations of college-level coursework. Additionally, I recommend that state and local policies reform developmental education in ways that account for what's going on in the classroom. Lastly, I discuss areas requiring additional research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature necessary to locate the problem of attrition in developmental English at community colleges in the classroom. To this end, the chapter is divided into six sections. First, I briefly review the literature concerned with the history of community colleges to provide the historical context for the sector's high enrollment of developmental education students. Second, I consider the scope and nature of community college students' participation in developmental education based on the findings from research studies using large national and state-level survey datasets. The evidence suggests that some phenomenon (or phenomena) inside the developmental education experience shapes students' failure and/or withdraw. Third, I briefly review the landscape of literature concerned with various aspects of students' experiences in developmental education. Here, I suggest that the studies largely ignore the most important aspect of student success or failure, namely their learning experiences in the classroom. Fourth, to illuminate the centrality of the students' learning experiences in shaping success or failure, I review a small selection of literature about teaching learning in higher education. This provides a theoretical framework helpful in understanding the extant literature in the next section, as well as underpins my methods and guides the interpretation of my findings in chapter five. Fifth, I review the composition and education scholarship that has sought to understand how students enrolled in developmental English come to meet with success or failure. This section is separated into three main categories. First, I review the composition scholarship debating to what extent developmental English acculturates student into the conventions of academic writing and thinking. Second, I review the literature from composition scholars that built upon their predecessors' acculturation

framework to understand the role of pedagogy in helping students acculturate to the formal dialect of academic writing. Third, I review the few studies that have examined how the interactions between content, professor, and students inside the developmental English classroom have shaped student success or failure. The review in this section highlights the need for classroom level investigation in developmental English at community colleges to understand how students come to meet with success or failure. Finally, the literature review ends with a brief discussion of recent policies initiatives intended to ameliorate attrition in developmental education. Here, I highlight the shortcomings of these initiatives in light to what is known from the literature. This discussion also provides the basis for policy recommendations in chapter five.

### **Community Colleges and Developmental Education**

Community colleges have grown rapidly over the last 50 years to meet the demands of a growing population and increasing demand for college access all while controlling public costs and maintaining the prestige of state colleges and flagship universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). The role of community colleges in American higher education was established by the California Master Plan for Higher Education in California 1960-1975 (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Liaison Committee of the Regents of the University of California and the State Department of Education, 1960). The Master Plan was devised to build capacity that allowed for universal access, yet controlled costs, all while reinforcing and maintaining selectivity in the state's elite university system. The ultimate goal of the plan was to enroll 45% of California public higher education students in community colleges. To achieve this, the plan called for a policy that all students graduating high school in the top 12.5% of their class could enroll in the University of California system, those graduating in the top 33.5% of their high school class could enroll in the California State College system, and everyone else could enroll in community

colleges. In the California Master Plan, the community college was solidified as what Kerr (1978) referred to as the “first line of defense” in protecting the prestige of 4-year universities. Indeed, because community colleges enrolled the majority of students seeking higher education, 4-year institutions were able to enroll only the students most academically successful in high school.

In the years following, the increasing demand for higher education, coupled with the significantly lower per student costs and the protection of prestige for 4-year universities made the Californian Master Plan the basis for public higher education the country (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). Indeed, the relatively open access policies, easy accessibility, and low costs have made community colleges attractive choices for both students and policy makers alike. For students, community college represents an opportunity to realize the social and economic benefits of higher education without possessing the required educational background. Additionally, the low costs and accessible locations allow students to attend college without the financial resources needed to enroll in more selective, traditional, residential colleges. For policy makers, community colleges prove attractive choices for providing mass public higher education at low costs while maintaining the prestige of senior institutions (see for example, Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Labaree, 1997; Shaw, 1997; Trow, 1973).

The rapid expansion policies around the country that followed the California Master Plan resulted in an explosion in community college enrollment after 1960. Whereas overall college enrollment grew by 169% between 1965 and 2001, community college enrollment grew 476% (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). By 1975, community colleges began approaching almost half of all public higher education enrollments. While this was the intent of only the California Master Plan, it was nonetheless reflected across the country. Today, community colleges have grown to

represent the single largest segment of U.S. higher education, enrolling 46.7% (or 7.13 million) of all public higher education students in the fall of 2011 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012).

The rapid rise in enrollment across public higher education following open admissions policies during the 1960s and 1970s meant an increasing diversity of students, many of whom were not prepared for college-level coursework (Shaughnessy, 1977). Accordingly, the need for institutionalized developmental education was established in both 4- and 2-year institutions.

After 5 decades of expansion, capacities in community colleges now provide policy makers across the country with institutions to segregate and enroll students deemed underprepared for college-level coursework (Shaw, 1997). Many local and/or state policies require that in public higher education only community colleges offer developmental education courses. The goal of such policies is not necessarily to exclude students from selective institutions, but rather to maintain access to higher education for students who are deemed underprepared for college-level coursework and provide preparatory courses at a much lower cost than doing so at a 4-year institution. For example, in the late 1990s New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani instituted a policy to phase out developmental education from senior City University of New York (CUNY) institutions by requiring any student who required developmental education to enroll in one of the city's community colleges (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001). Similar policies can be observed in Florida, Texas, and California, some of the country's largest community college systems (Shaw, 1997).

Policies that enroll large swaths of students who are deemed underprepared for college, coupled with open admissions policies, accessible locations, and relatively low cost, have helped concentrate students with weak educational backgrounds from non-White, low-income families in community colleges (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Accordingly, community colleges enroll more

students in developmental education than any other sector. In fact, Attewell et al. (2006) estimated that 58% of students who graduated high school in 1992 and attended a community college were enrolled in at least one developmental reading, writing, or math course. In contrast, only 31% of students attending non-selective 4-year institutions, 14% of students attending selective 4-year institutions, and 2% of students attending highly selective colleges or universities enrolled in a developmental education course.

To understand who enrolls in developmental education at community colleges and who benefits, I reviewed the state-wide and national large-scale survey research concerned with community college developmental education (Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2010a; Bahr, 2008; Bailey, 2009; Bailey et al., 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). The results of these studies suggested that if a student who enrolls in developmental education makes it to a college-level course, then they stand the same chance of degree attainment and/or transfer as students who were deemed prepared. However, most of the students who enroll in developmental education at community colleges do not make it to a college-level course.

### **Success and Failure of Developmental Education**

Whether or not a student is referred to developmental education, and how many developmental education courses a student must take before enrolling in a college-level course is decided by students' score on a placement test compared to state or locally determined cutoff scores. The test is usually either ACT's COMPASS or College Board's ACCUPLACER, which include standardized sections on reading comprehension, grammar, mathematics, and essay prompts. The cutoff scores sort students by ability and are intended to predict which students will and will not be successful in college-level coursework. In states where cutoff scores are locally

determined, a student who takes a placement test at one community college might be deemed underprepared for a college-level course, but that same score on the same test at a community college only miles away might indicate that the student is prepared for college-level coursework.

For the students who are deemed underprepared, enroll in developmental education, *and* make it to a college-level course, large-scale survey research has suggested that they have the same or better short-term (i.e. fall to fall persistence) and long-term (i.e. degree attainment/transfer) outcomes as students are deemed prepared (Bahr, 2010a; Bahr, 2008; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). For example, Bahr (2008) assessed the students enrolled in the 107 California community colleges to compare the credential attainment or transfer of students in developmental math to students who enrolled in college-level math. The students who passed through their developmental math course(s) and enrolled in a college-level course had the same transfer/degree attainment as those deemed prepared. Accordingly, Bahr concluded that “remedial math programs are highly effective at resolving skill deficiencies” (p. 421). However, since Bahr’s sample was comprised of students across a state where students can enroll in either developmental education or college-level courses regardless of placement test scores, he essentially compared students who *chose* to enroll in developmental math and those who *chose* to enroll in a college-level course. Accordingly, it could be the case that many of the students who passed developmental math and experienced the positive outcomes were referred to a college-level course.

In a slightly stronger research design, Bettinger and Long (2009) found similar effects for developmental education in a sample of Ohio public higher education (including the community college system). Since developmental placement cutoff scores for students who took the ACT



vary across Ohio public colleges, the researchers were able to compare academically similar students (indicated by ACT scores) who were enrolled in developmental education and those who were not. The researchers' descriptive statistic indicated that enrollment in developmental education negatively impacted persistence to degree or transfer over a 6 year period. However, after they controlled for a range of variables—race/ethnicity, family income, and high school GPA—they found a positive correlation between enrollment in developmental education and persistence, degree attainment, and transfer for statistically similar students. The Bettinger and Long study theoretically removed student choice as a confounding variable, but their sample only included students who took the ACTs, thus excluding a wide swath of students who enroll in community colleges and place into developmental education.

Perhaps the strongest studies about the effect of developmental education employed a regression discontinuity analysis whereby researchers exploit state-wide, mandated, placement-tests and cutoff scores in a quasi-experimental design (i.e. Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). For example, Calcagno and Long (2008) analyzed the impact of developmental education in all 28 Florida community colleges. Since Florida has a state-wide ACCUPLACER product developed specifically for the state and state mandated cutoff scores, the researchers were able to test the effects of enrollment in developmental education on a range of short-term and long-term outcomes by comparing students who were just above and below the cutoff score. Analyzing the public education database for the state, which included almost 100,000 first-time, degree-seeking, community college students' demographics, placement test scores, and high school degree attainment, the researchers found both positive and negative results. Compared to similar students who were placed in college-level courses, enrollment in developmental math and reading led to more college credits after 6 years. However, enrollment in developmental reading

slightly lessened a student's likelihood that they would pass college-level English, and enrollment in developmental math had no impact on a student's likelihood that they would pass college-level math. Perhaps most importantly, placement in developmental education had "no discernable impact" on degree attainment and/or transfer.

The research on the effects of developmental education suggests that, for some students, enrollment in developmental education promotes persistence and degree attainment. However, these studies were state specific, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of developmental education because of confounding variables, including curriculum, pedagogy, culture, and so forth. Regardless, the evidence is fairly clear that for students who make it through their developmental course(s) and enroll in a college-level course, developmental education does not hurt, and more likely helps.

However, most of the students who are enrolled in developmental education never make it to a college-level course (Bailey, 2009; Bailey et al., 2010). Bailey (2009) analyzed a range of student demographics and outcome data from 57 community colleges across 10 states voluntarily participating in the Achieving the Dream Initiative. He found that after 3 years of initial enrollment, 56% of the community college students who were referred to any developmental reading course and 69% of student referred to a developmental math course never enrolled in a college-level course.

The evidence from both national and state-level survey research suggests that students who are least likely to benefit from a referral to developmental education are those referred to multiple levels, and students in that category are more likely to be non-White, from a low SES family, and have weak educational backgrounds (e.g. Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2010b; Bailey, et al., 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009). For example, Attewell et al. (2006) found in their analysis

of NELS:88 that only after controlling for race/ethnicity, family SES, academic preparation, and high school performance were developmental education students as likely to achieve a credential or transfer (i.e. they enrolled in a college-level course) as students who were initially deemed prepared. These findings led the researchers to conclude that “low family SES, poor high school preparation, and being Black” are “causal factors” for students enrolled in developmental education not progressing toward a credential and/or transfer (p. 905). Attewell et al.’s (2006) study provides the demographics of students who do not particularly benefit from developmental education, but their causal conclusions are erroneous since they did not conduct an experiment.

In another example, Bettinger and Long’s (2009) research found that the positive effects of enrollment in developmental education eroded after controlling for race/ethnicity, family income, and high school GAP. In fact, the positive effects of developmental education were mostly for students who were as likely to be referred to a college-level course. As the researchers narrowed their sample toward these so called “marginal students,” the effect size increased, suggesting that developmental education in the Ohio sample was particularly unhelpful for students deemed least prepared.

Other studies suggest that Bettinger and Long found that race/ethnicity, family income, and high school GPA negatively impacted student success because developmental education is particularly unhelpful for students who are referred to multiple levels of developmental coursework, and the students in that category tend to be non-White, low income and have low high school GPAs (Bahr, 2010b; Bailey et al., 2010). Bahr’s (2010b) assessment of racial disparities in the California community college system revealed a negative relationship between the levels of math remediation needed and likelihood of persistence to a college-level math course. Bahr found that African Americans and Latinos were much less likely to remediate

successfully in math compared to Whites and Asians because African Americans and Latinos began their developmental education at the lowest levels in much higher numbers. However, even when Bahr controlled for SES and high school GPA and then assessed race/ethnicity for students beginning at the same levels of remediation, White and Asian students were still more likely to make it to a college-level math course. These findings suggest that despite enrollment in the same developmental math courses, students' outcomes can vary by race.

Other evidence suggests that referral and/or enrollment in developmental education itself largely accounts for the high attrition. Bailey et al. (2010) tracked students in the Achieving the Dream database for 3 academic years and found that students deemed underprepared by their community college were significantly more likely to complete their first college-level course if they ignored their developmental referral and enroll in a college-level course. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the students who ignored their math or reading placement successfully completed a college-level course. Only 27% of the students who enrolled in the recommended developmental course successfully completed a college-level course. The only empirically observable difference between the two groups was that students who skipped their developmental referral actually enrolled in a college-level course.

Bailey et al. also found that students who skipped their developmental referral passed their college-level course at lower rates than students who successfully completed their developmental education. Moreover, students who skipped their referral and failed the college-level course were much less likely to earn *any* college-credit after 3 years. Accordingly, the findings suggest that developmental education in the Achieving the Dream sample both hindered and helped students. That is, most students were better off skipping their referral, but for some students developmental education was central to successfully passing a college-level course.

This seems particularly true for the subset of students who enroll in developmental English. The attrition among these students seems particularly problematic because of the centrality of basic reading and writing in the other disciplines. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that students enrolled in developmental math are much less likely to successfully pass their course(s) if they are underprepared for English (Bahr, 2007). While math is no less important to earning a college degree (particularly in math intensive fields), college-level English skills (namely reading and writing) are precursors to success in all disciplines, including math.

In sum, large-scale survey research suggests that developmental education is broken. Most of the students who enroll never make it to a college-level course. The students least likely to benefit are those referred to multiple levels, and students in that category tend to be non-White, low SES, and have weak educational backgrounds. However, the evidence also suggests that, for many students, developmental education is a central aspect of preparing for success in college-level courses. This is particularly true for developmental English because college-level reading and writing skills are central to success in all disciplines, including math.

### **The Community College Developmental Education Literature Landscape**

The landscape of the literature concerning why most students who enroll in developmental education at community colleges never make it to a college-level course is wide-ranging. Several key pieces that are often cited provide mostly descriptive accounts of successful developmental education programs and/or interventions at various community colleges (i.e. Boylan, 2002; Boylan, Bonham, & Tafari, 2005). These studies draw upon theoretical frameworks for student retention (i.e. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), as well as descriptive accounts from focal community college programs to identify “best practice.”

Key themes of the developmental education literature suggests that student success can be improved with centrally organized developmental education and mandatory enrollment (i.e. Boylan, 2002), limiting the amount of time spent in developmental education (i.e. Bailey et al., 2010; Baker, 2011), instituting formal learning communities (Barnes & Piland, 2013; Malnarich, 2005; Raftery, 2005; Tinto, 1998), and providing so called *wraparound* academic services, including academic success courses and mandatory tutoring (Perin, 2004; Perin & Charron, 2006). All of these interventions have merit. In fact, there appears to be a consensus that the more clearly the students' trajectories are defined for them, the more contact students have with their community college, and the more help they have with passing their developmental courses, the more likely they are to persist to a college-level course.

However, the fact that these interventions improved some measure of student success in developmental education at a focal community college does not suggest that the lack of the intervention under evaluation is why most students who enroll in developmental English do not make it to a college-level course. Regardless, there is little evidence to suggest that these interventions are being widely adopted, or if they are, that they are improving students' persistence to a college-level course.

The largest omission in these studies is insight into the students' learning experiences in the classroom. Several scholars have demonstrated that students' learning experiences in both 2-year and 4-year developmental English classrooms are the central aspect shaping success or failure (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Carter, 2006; Cox, 2009; Fox, 1990; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hull, et al., 1991; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997; Sternglass, 1997). This body of literature suggests that understanding how students come to succeed or fail requires examining the interactions among three aspects of teaching and

learning: content, professor, and students (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). Examining the interactions among these three aspects requires uncovering what professors teach in a course (content), how they help students learn the content (pedagogy), and how students respond to the content and pedagogy (learning) (Cohen et al., 2003).

To understand the theoretical framework explicit or implicit in the developmental English classroom literature, as well as the methods and findings of this dissertation, I first developed a framework to illuminate how educational outcomes are shaped in pedagogical relationships between professors and students.

### **A Conceptual Framework for Investigating the Problem**

How and what professors teach in a given course is based upon their disciplinary knowledge, understanding of teaching, expectations for student learning, and perceptions of students (Bain, 2004; Hillocks, 1999; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Ramsden, 2003). Students' learning in a course is shaped by their disciplinary understandings, personal aims and intents, preconceived notions of teaching and learning, and experiences as a student (both past and present) (Bain, 2004; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Hillocks, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Importantly, since the professor holds the authority in the relationship, students' learning activities in a course are the "response to the implicit or explicit requirements of their teachers" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 64). That is, students' efforts in a course are generally focused on meeting the professor's explicit directions or implicit expectations, which are communicated via discussion, the syllabus, and/or other course documents (i.e. rubrics). These interactions between a professor's explicit or implicit requirements (teaching), and the students' efforts (or lack of) in meeting their professor's expectations (learning) comprises the pedagogical relationship in which course outcomes become manifested.

Since professors hold the authority inside a classroom, and teaching and learning take place inside of the pedagogical relationship, professors' approaches to pedagogy have tremendous influence upon how students engage the courses, and thus how (or if) students learn. Generally, approaches to pedagogy can be understood as either teacher centered or student centered. Teacher-centered pedagogy, or the traditional approach teaching, has been described as a process whereby an expert stands in front of a class and professes facts or ideas that have been developed over centuries of thinking (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). The aim of teaching in this way is to transmit a certain body of knowledge from the professor to the students, and it assumes that (a) students are "empty vessels" to be filled up with knowledge by the professor, and (b) learning is a relatively passive process of receiving knowledge in a hierarchal part-to-whole process with each skill or idea building upon previously transmitted knowledge in a succession of increasingly difficult concepts (Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Ramsden, 2003). However, investigating teaching and learning has upended this idea and suggested that students who are given information to memorize for later recall do not construct their own understandings, and therefore, after their short-term memory fades, they are left only with their original understanding (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Ramsden, 2003).

Conversely, student-centered pedagogy, which uses a constructive process, has been linked to more meaningful learning (also referred to as deep learning) (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Teaching through a constructive process focuses on students by engaging them in some material, problem, or activity that requires them to reflect upon their understanding and assess its usefulness to the learning situation created by the professor, and then build upon and/or rethink their present understanding in order to meet



the demands of the educational activity (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Engaging in this constructive process of learning requires students to integrate the knowledge they had already possessed and the new knowledge they are taught in order to think and understand differently. Researchers have demonstrated that when students construct knowledge for themselves, they are better able to apply this knowledge in the future across a variety of contexts (Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003).

Research regarding teaching and learning in higher education has found that students learn better when they are led to construct knowledge rather than remember facts (e.g. Bain, 2004; Ramsden, 2003). For example, Bain (2004) analyzed the perspectives and practices of 63 professors across a variety of disciplines in the United States and Australia whose students and colleagues agreed were highly effective at helping students learn. Bain found that effective teaching was predicated upon a professor's understanding that knowledge is constructed, not absorbed, and the best professors lead students to learning by creating a "natural and critical learning environment" (p. 99). That is, teachers who are regarded by their students and colleagues as teaching well present students with interesting problems in a context that requires them to naturally develop and use the skills they are being taught. These professors avoid providing correct answers to students and instead insist that students use their power of reasoning (i.e. critical thinking) to solve the problems presented.

Bain's findings paint a clear picture of what the best college teaching looks like from the students' perspective; however, it does not necessarily assess the learning outcomes that might follow from a constructivist approach. Ramsden (2003) drew on a wide range of smaller studies about teaching and learning from various disciplines across higher education to conclude that

teaching from a constructivist perspective leads not only to student satisfaction, as Bain (2004) concluded, but also to higher grades and the ability to apply new knowledge across different contexts after the course is completed (Ramsden, 2003). Ramsden's meta-analysis centered upon understanding how students' engagement in a course was shaped by the learning context their professor created. Ramsden reported that students' accounts of their learning experiences described two general approaches to learning, "surface" and "deep." Students who take deep approaches to their learning maintain an intention to understand, which is demonstrated in large part by their using learning activities to identify connections with previous knowledge, life experiences, and content in other courses. Conversely, students who demonstrated a shallow approach to learning oftentimes focused on word association, memorization, and separate content from understanding in order to efficiently pass assessments.

Ramsden's theoretical assertions suggest that a professor's teaching shapes how students learn (either surface or deep), and it was concluded that effective teaching ought to be conceived of as "making [deep] learning possible" (p. 110). Accordingly, the content to be taught is secondary to understanding any challenges students might have in learning that content. That is, since learning must engage and build upon students' previous knowledge, effective teaching is predicated upon the idea that all teaching is context specific and requires the professor to research the students' understandings in order to identify the problems students are having with learning, "considering the needs of a particular group of students" and then selecting content and devising approaches that engage these particular students by solving the problems they face (p. 131).

From this perspective, educational outcomes are shaped in pedagogical relationships between professors and students, and this relationship is animated by the pedagogy professors

enact to help students achieve learning in a course. In the next section, I review the developmental English literature that considers how content, students, and pedagogy interact to shape success or failure.

### **Teaching and Learning in Developmental English**

Mina Shaughnessy (1977) is generally credited with establishing the field of developmental English instruction over 30 years ago (Bartholomae, 1985; Fox, 1990; Shor, 1997). Shaughnessy (1977), who was working at the City University of New York (CUNY) in the 1970's when it adopted an open admissions policy under populist pressure, argued that the newly adopted policy would require English professors to change their pedagogy if they were to help the newly admitted students who were not versed in the "dialect of formal writing" to achieve the reading and writing skills necessary for success in college (p. 45). Since then, composition and education scholars have sought to understand how students enrolled in these classes meet with success or failure.

The scholarship in this regard can be separated into three main categories. First, much of the early literature on the topic came from composition scholarship that debated the extent to which developmental English was acculturating student to the conventions of academic writing and thinking. To this end, I consider the relevant conversation among English scholars since Shaughnessy. The trajectory of the literature results in a philosophical impasse that suggests developmental English is at least as much about acculturating marginalized students as it is about the mechanics of writing. Second, I review the literature from composition scholars that built upon their predecessors' acculturation framework to understand the role of pedagogy in helping students acculturate to the formal dialect of academic writing. Finally, I review the few studies

that have examined how the interactions between content, professor, and students inside the developmental English classroom have shaped student success or failure.

### **Developmental English as Acculturation**

In her seminal work, *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy (1977) reported findings from an assessment of more than 4,000 placement essays of basic writing students at CUNY from 1970-1974. In painstaking detail, Shaughnessy provided example after example of the logic in the students' sentence, punctuation, syntax, and structural errors. For example, Shaughnessy pointed out that most student errors are syntactical. For many of these students their social groups have not introduced them to the dialect of academic writing, and so they rely on their dialect of spoken English. Accordingly, their writing often has "skips and misses," which leads the reader to expect one kind of subject clause agreement but presents another (e.g. I going home to work—skipped "am"—or, I be going home to be working—missed am for be) (pp. 45, 48). Accordingly, Shaughnessy argued that for the professor to be successful in helping these students with this syntactical issue, she/he must understand that the student is not failing to hear the problem in revision, but "sees what he means, rather than what he writes" (p. 48). By this example, Shaughnessy is suggesting that if a professor comes to understand the logic of the students' errors, then the professor will see that the student needs to be taught to objectify their writing in review, not be given more grammar lessons.

Shaughnessy (1976, 1977) pointed out that without professors' understanding the logic of student errors, writing is a "trap." Rather than a way to communicate thoughts and ideas, an essay is the evidence by which professors prove all the ways that students cannot control the dialect of academic writing so unfamiliar to them. Through her close examination of student essays, Shaughnessy teased out the logic and coherence in the students' errors, and therefore the

error professors make in assuming the students are cognitively deficient. According to Shaughnessy, the professor who does not see the “logic of the students’ error” “forms little interest in what is being said” (p. 120). Ultimately, Shaughnessy’s (1977) work established the present-day field of basic writing and, in doing so, dismissed wholesale the notion that students in developmental education have cognitive or genetic deficiencies that inhibit learning. Instead, Shaughnessy established the paradigm that these students challenge professors to consider the arbitrary nature of so called Standard English, the purposes for writing, and to develop pedagogies that require professors to give students access to the dominant culture and its language conventions.

Shaughnessy’s (1977) central argument is one of student acculturation, but she did not indicate to what extent students ought to be acculturated or to what end. Accordingly, her work does not address the more important obstacle professors and students’ face, namely trying to develop the skills to read and write in another culture. Regardless, Shaughnessy opened a Pandora’s box and by arguing that students’ essential struggles are with the cultural gap, which professors can see in the students’ syntactical and grammatical errors, but leaves the larger implications of the cultural gaps unexplored. For example, she called on professors to question the hegemony of the dominant culture and language, but maintained that the students must ultimately develop the ability to use the dialect of Standard English. Rather than grapple with the conflict acculturation presents, she only argued that professors must be able to do develop students’ writing in such a way that does not “conflict with the deeper needs for self-respect and loyalty to [the student’s] group” (p. 125). Without understanding how students experience acculturation into the academy, it is difficult to know the range of challenges cultural gaps create

for students and professors, or how professors are to teach writing in a way that honors the students' dialects and culture without conflict.

Since Shaughnessy, scholars have considered the implications of the cultural gap students in developmental education face when they enter the academy (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Fox, 1990). Bizzell's (1986) commentary questioned the extent to which these cultural gaps are overcome by helping students acquire the syntactical and grammatical conventions of the academy. Bizzell argued that if the difference between a student's prose and the prose required in the academy is simply the difference between the dialect of the student's home culture and the dialect of the academy (i.e. Standard English), then teaching Standard English would remedy the problem. However, as Bizzell pointed out, writing is more fundamentally a demonstration of thinking than a demonstration of linguistic convention. Therefore, the central challenge for students is not overcoming the syntactical and grammatical differences as Shaughnessy argued, rather the central challenge is that students from dominated cultures oftentimes do not think (and thus, neither write nor speak) in accordance with the values privileged in higher education.

To illustrate her point, Bizzell considered the example of a working class student who has difficulty understanding a writing process in higher education that requires objective consideration of multiple viewpoints because the parents' authority goes unquestioned in the cultural milieu of her home. Accordingly, such a student does not know how to draw only qualified and situational conclusions. For Bizzell, the key to helping students acculturate is not simply having the professor study students' errors, but having the professor understand the students' worldviews, since they orient the entirety of students' thinking, and therefore their writing.

Although, Bizzell considered the role of cultural gaps beyond writing mechanics, she nonetheless drew a conclusion similar to that of Shaughnessy (1977). Namely, basic writing is a matter of acculturation to the linguistic and/or cultural conventions of the dominant culture because it is privileged in higher education. Accordingly, Bizzell (1986) contended that the larger the gap between a student's culture and the one he/she will need to adopt to be successful in higher education, the more difficulty the student will have in becoming "bicultural" and the more difficulty professors will have teaching the student. This stands to reason since the more a student thinks and writes in ways valued in higher education, the less likely they are to be deemed underprepared. For Bizzell, the central work of developmental English is to introduce students to the cultural gap so they understand their literacy difficulties as marginalization rather than incompetence. The developmental English professor's role, then, is to help students learn how to translate one way of writing, and thus thinking, into the kind of writing and thinking valued in college.

Bartholomae's (1985) assessment of 500 placement essays that categorized university students as "basic writers" prompted him to argue that the essential difficulty of students deemed underprepared (or all writers, for that matter) is establishing voice and authority. The basic task required to demonstrate college-level writing literacy is to position oneself in a discourse (voice) with some knowledge or insight worth writing about (authority). Bartholomae concluded that students are acutely aware that they must perform both of these in close approximation to the ways valued in higher education in order to be deemed prepared. His analysis of the placement essays suggested that students who do not consider multiple viewpoints are "playing it safe," using only language they can control. Conversely, for students who venture into prose that better

approximates college-level writing (i.e. nuanced, dense, and complicated), they are oftentimes unable to control the language.

Bartholomae's central critique of developmental English instruction is that writing in college means acquiring the voice and authority of several privileged discourses (i.e. disciplinary discourse communities—history, sociology, literature, etc.); however, the test of college-level writing competency holds the expectations of demonstrating one's ability out of these contexts. Accordingly, only students who have had access to learning how to write in ways considered college-level can demonstrate competency. Students who have not had access to the conventions of college-level writing can only locate themselves in the context of *I* and can only acquire the authority of authority figures in their life (i.e. parents, teachers, etc.). In this way, the language of the student in developmental English, approximate and unproblematic, oftentimes makes sweeping generalizations that appear to their professors as illogical and in need of development.

Like Bizzell (1986), Bartholomae (1985, 1993) maintained that cultural gaps between students in developmental English and the academy have considerably more implications than simply the need for improving mechanics. More specifically, he raised the specter of cultural exclusion through developmental English courses. In other words, Bartholomae (1985) suggested that ways of knowing located in the student's cultures are systematically eradicated or excluded from college-level writing under the guise of academic competency in the developmental English classroom. Unfairly, according to Bartholomae, developmental English courses do not help address the essential hurdle these students face, developing voice and authority in the multiple discourses of the academy; rather, developmental English curricula generally focuses on issues of sentence-level error, the use of topic sentences, and the generation of ideas. However, even



after this remediation the students who make it to a college-level course will still face the essential challenge of gaining access to the writing conventions necessary for success in college.

Whereas Bizzell (1985) and Shaughnessy's (1977) argued that developmental English must acculturate students into the ways of writing and thinking necessary for success in college, Fox (1990) argued that pedagogies of initiation are problematic because they highlight and seek difference between how the students read, write, and think and those privileged in higher education. Using a case study of one basic writing student in the California state system who wrote about navigating Black gang culture in Compton, Los Angeles and the White academic culture of the university, Fox illuminated the serious risks (sometimes physical) one student enrolled in developmental English faced in giving up his Black, gang-member, cultural identity when he began acting White.

For Fox, a pedagogy of initiation means that the work of professors is to help students abandon their cultural ways of knowing through writing and replace it with the writing conventions privileged in higher education. Yet, Bizzell (1986) argued that a student will do so willingly, assessing any risk in being admonished in their home culture (or gang in Fox's example) as worth the risk of acquiring "the hegemonic power of the academic worldview" (p. 301). However, Fox (1990) argued that such a view presupposes that the "academic worldview" is stable and unalterable by students enrolled in developmental English. That is, a pedagogy of initiation advocated by Bizzell and Shaughnessy means that only students who "acquire a new way of understanding, knowing, arguing, [and] reflecting" can succeed in college (p. 72). Accordingly, Fox argued that this pedagogical approach is not emancipatory as proponents had suggested; rather, it reified the academy as the arbiter of dominant culture and legitimized the power of those who control its language conventions. Perhaps more problematic—or at least a

more practical concern—is that a pedagogy of initiation fails to account for the historical and racial currents that shape all culture. Therefore, a pedagogy of initiation focused on acculturation is likely to excluded students in developmental English from higher education rather than promote their inclusion. Rather than initiate students, Fox called for a pedagogy of “participation” whereby professors “convince students [enrolled in developmental English] that this community [of higher education] is theirs” (p. 75).

Fox’s philosophical argument that acculturation results in an exclusionary experience for students deepens and extends Shaughnessy’s (1977) seminal articulation of the cultural gap between students in developmental English and the rest of higher education, as well as the difficulties this gap presents for helping students develop college-level literacy. However, Fox (1990) did not provide any insight into what a pedagogy of participation might look like. Like Fox, Bartholomae (1993) argued that a basic writing curriculum focusing on “initiation” elides the cultural differences that predestined the existence of developmental English courses in the first place. Accordingly, Bartholomae suggested that curriculum and pedagogy ought to acknowledge that students enrolled in developmental English are competent thinkers and, rather than seek to help students acquire certain discourse conventions (acculturate), students should be encouraged to explore for themselves how meaning is created through text. As Fox (1990) suggested, this requires professors to allow their position of authority to be open for critique or even parody.

In sum, for Bartholomae (1985, 1993; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986) and Fox (1990) the fundamental problem facing developmental English professors is, as Shaughnessy (1977) articulated, students who are deemed underprepared are, for the most part, from marginalized cultures and their corresponding ways of communication are marginalized in higher education.

However, whereas Shaughnessy argued that uncovering the logic of students' errors to help them correct their syntactical and grammatical errors will help students bridge the gap, Bizzell (1986) suggested that the logic of students' errors is located not in their text, but in their ways of knowing. Further, picking up on the larger implications of the cultural gap in developmental English courses, Bartholomae (1993) and Fox (1990) argued that helping students develop college-level literacy requires a pedagogy that honors students' ways of communicating and knowing. In theory, if students feel like what they have to say matters because it can shape "their" college, and if the pedagogy and curriculum help students discover their marginalization, and if they are provided the opportunity to participate in the conversation (rather than practice grammar), then students' literacy practices will develop to more closely resemble the dialect of academic writing.

Regardless, the impasse remains. As long as the mark of a higher education is the possession of the literacy practices of the dominant culture, students placed in developmental education will need to acculturate. Developmental education is an acculturating (or exclusionary) construct. The extent to which students can become bicultural (Bizzell, 1986) and professors engage in the self-reflection required to gently attract students to the dominant culture, conflict might be minimized (Shaughnessy, 1977). Still, it seems reasonable to assume that Bizzell (1986) is correct: The larger the gap between the students' culture and the culture of the academy, the more professors will marginalize the student, and in turn, the more students are marginalized, the more difficulty they will have acculturating (i.e. passing developmental English).

### **Acculturating in Developmental English**

More recently, composition scholars have articulated what happens during the acculturation process. Collectively their evidence can be understood as describing the developmental English classroom as a “contact zone,” the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 1). The research suggests that students can find success learning college-level literacies in the contact zone when they are provided opportunities beyond grammar instruction to grapple with the gap between their culture and the one privileged in the academy (Carter, 2006; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997; Rose, 2005; Sternglass, 1997).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that developing college-level literacy is more a matter of providing students the context to establish voice and authority (Bartholomae, 1985) rather than providing instruction in syntactical and grammatical conventions is Soliday and Gleason’s (Gleason, 2000; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997) reports of their mainstreaming project at the City College of New York (CCNY). The observations of arbitrary placement standards for freshman English prompted CCNY to mainstream students who would be enrolled in developmental English into college-level English. Soliday (1996) headed the Enrichment project, which included 1,000 student participants of whom only 365 would have placed into college-level English. The remainder of the students who would have been placed into a developmental English course were given additional in-class and out-of-class support to develop their college-level writing skills. Unlike the regular developmental course, the Enrichment program was a full-year, credit-bearing course with a mix of students deemed prepared and underprepared. As director of the program, Soliday asked the professors to focus their classroom activities on developing students’ awareness of the differences and similarities

between their spoken and written language, as well as using academic discourse to describe and analyze the language of everyday life (e.g. working, living in the city, etc.). Soliday and Gleason (1997) reported that the results of the pilot project were overwhelmingly positive. To assess the project they enlisted outside readers in the English department who had not taught any sections of the pilot course to read the portfolios of a random selection of 22 students. Of 110 total readings (22 students, 5 essays per portfolio) only 13 readings were judged to be below average or failing.

The results from CCNY's Enrichment project suggest that developmental placement, at least at CCNY, was, in fact, arbitrary and serving an exclusionary function, as Fox (1990) and Bartholomae (1993) have argued. That is, Soliday and Gleason's (1997) findings show that students can develop college-level literacy in the context of college-level courses rather than be labeled as *basic*, *developmental*, or *remedial*.

More germane to the present review, Soliday (1996) used one student as a case study to demonstrate how a would-be developmental student who was mainstreamed into college-level English successfully developed college-level literacy skills. Comparing the progress of one African American student across several essays, Soliday demonstrated how using culturally relevant text (e.g. academic essays about African American culture) provided the context for the student to begin working through his own complex thinking using written language. In the case study, Soliday provided textual evidence of the student's evolution from an initial "either/or" writing style to a more conventional academic discourse that considered nuance across multiple sides of an argument. For this student, Soliday maintained, success was at least in part facilitated by a classroom that presented him with scholarly material considering the historical uses of the word *nigger*, an academic argument that he could easily contextualize in the culture he navigated

outside of the college. However, Soliday's research neither makes clear to what extent the student developed his college-level literacy because of the students' cultural identification with the course content, nor to what extent pedagogy and support services played a role in the student's new skills.

While Soliday (1996) did not illuminate the extent to which explicit instruction in college-level writing practices helped the student in her study evolve, Carter (2006) reported success using a developmental English curriculum in which the explicit learning goals centered upon students developing a sense of multiple literacies and their unwritten rules. For Carter, this included asking students to explore the literacy accepted in college and "articulating the unwritten rules participants must obey... to become accepted members" (p. 114). Accordingly, Carter's curriculum helped students understand that cultural gaps can be understood as seemingly arbitrary rules for literacy, which are developed in the context of home or school, and provided students with explicit how-to instructions in meeting the expectations of the writing conventions required for success in college.

There is evidence to suggest that the students deemed underprepared in Soliday's (1996) and Carter's (2006) case studies, may, like many students, simply have been savvy at giving professors what they wanted. Assessing the differences between proficient working-class and middle-class writers, Ashley (2001) found that Bartholomae's (1985) assessment of students' approximating academic discourse was the way working class students accounted for their success. More specifically, Ashley (2001) conducted a case study of four upper-level students at a non-selective 4-year institution taking an English course to train them to tutor first-year developmental education students and found that working-class students oftentimes explained their writing as intended to get a certain grade. While it is unclear how this might differ from

the middle-class students' approach to writing, these students oftentimes described their strategy as "playing the game," that is, learning what college-level writing required and incorporating those ideas, structure, and words into their essays (p. 504). For the four students in Ashley's study, their approach resulted in success, but made them feel detached and voiceless in their writing, not acculturated and included. Ashley's finding may be telling of how students from dominated cultures navigate higher education more generally. Accordingly, Soliday's (1996) and Carter's (2006) assessments of their students' progress could simply be a matter of students approximating the discourse of their professors, regardless of the course's content. In other words, the available evidence suggests that student success is not tied to the use of culturally relevant course content; rather, success is tied to developing their ability to meet the expectations of college-level writing. To this end, curriculum and pedagogy may not be so much about infusing culturally relevant content as Soliday (1996) and Carter (2006) championed, but rather a matter of providing students the context and opportunity to practice college-level writing conventions. Doing so provides the opportunity to develop voice and authority (Bartholomae, 1993) in order to write and think in ways necessary for success in college (Bizzell, 1986).

Sternglass' (1997) longitudinal study of CCNY students beginning at one of two levels of developmental English and freshman composition demonstrated the point. Sternglass followed nine students (five of whom placed into the first or second level of developmental English originally) over the course of 6 years. The students were interviewed twice per semester and Sternglass analyzed countless essays these students had written over the research period. The students provided a range of essays from English and their other humanities courses, which included drafts, final drafts, and graded essays returned by professors. Using these data, Sternglass found that the opportunity to practice writing and receive feedback from the professor

to incorporate into future revisions was critical to helping students develop their writing ability. More specifically, Sternglass found that the students took cues about what and how to write from the feedback they were given. Sternglass noted that the students she followed from developmental English developed their college-level writing skills to the extent that the written responses from their professors challenged them to construct and convey meaning in the forms acceptable in college. Conversely, when a professor simply commented on the grammatical features of students writing the students did not develop the analytical skills necessary to be successful in English composition. Least useful were comments such as *good*, which did not help the students see the expectations of college-level writing, and thus compounded the students' disadvantages in future courses. Sternglass' evidence suggests that professors are culpable for students' college-level literacy development or lack thereof.

Importantly, one student in Sternglass' (1997) study reported that after completing developmental English she was able to successfully take an upper-level psychology course. The student reported a similar experience to the students in Ashley's (2001) study, telling Sternglass (1997) that she now "think[s] about what the professor wants" (p. 206). However, contrary to Ashley's conclusions that working class students simply play the game, Sternglass' student described this phenomenon as connecting directly to her learning. That is, the student came to understand the writing assignments in her psychology course as given to facilitate the development of her conceptual understandings and their real life applications. In this case, the professor's comments applauding the student's present understandings and pushing her toward more developed ones, is interpreted by the student as an indication of needing to revise in order to make it clear to the professor (and herself) that she understands the concepts she is responsible for learning. Accordingly, Sternglass' findings suggest that Ashley may have missed the larger



point, namely that students' utilitarian approaches are likely a precursor to developing their college-level literacy.

### **Inside the Developmental English Classroom**

Few scholars have observed teaching and learning inside the developmental English classroom (e.g. Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hull et al., 1991). These researchers suggested that poor outcomes in developmental English are in part attributable to (a) content empty pedagogy that fails to engage students in meaningful learning (Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013), (b) professors' misinterpretations of students' responses to pedagogy, which can lead professors to inadvertently diminish students' motivation (Cox, 2009; Hull et al., 1991), and (c) student's counterproductive behavior driven by their fear (Cox, 2009).

Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) has consistently reported that the majority of teaching in developmental education is teacher focused and results in student disengagement. Grubb maintains that developmental education professors generally enact a "remedial pedagogy." That is, they profess content-empty basic skills for students to memorize and then facilitate rote learning by having students complete practice drills that demonstrate proficiency with a focal skill.

For example, Grubb's (2013) report of his investigation of developmental education at 13 California community colleges details how most developmental English professors in his sample taught by lecturing students about basic skills or sub-skills, like identifying parts of a sentence, and then assigning worksheet or workbook drills to evaluate students' mastery of the skill. Like Grubb's (1999, 2010) previous research, he documented students' classroom behaviors (body language, comments, responses, etc.) and concluded that the teacher-focused and

decontextualized nature of remedial pedagogy was so tedious and boring for students that it promotes only “the most passive form of learning,” and thus makes it unlikely that any student could meaningfully engage (Grubb, 2013, p. 55). Additionally, Grubb (1999, 2013) argued that pedagogical approaches focused on skill drills ignore the students’ need to develop higher-level critical thinking, writing, and/or computational skills required for success in college-level courses.

Grubb (1999, 2013) has identified more effective approaches to developmental education whereby professors create richer learning experiences for their students that lead to more engagement with coursework. For example, some developmental English professors Grubb and his associates (1999) observed focused on reading and writing as social practices of communication (i.e. receiving and conveying meaning), rather than the memorization of grammar rules. Grubb concluded that these professors subordinate “technical issues to the larger problem of constructing meaning through writing... and the substance contributes to motivation in place of listless attention that is so obvious in drill-oriented classes” (p. 189).

Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) maintains that the decontextualized nature of skill drills is so intolerable to humans that it is virtually impossible for students to engage the pedagogy. However, the conclusions he drew from his findings were based mostly upon untested assumptions about students’ learning experiences. Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) never interviewed the students he observed to learn how they experienced the course or how the pedagogy he observed negatively or positively impacted their learning experiences. Instead, Grubb relied on observations of “listlessness” that left the actual learning experiences of students undocumented.

Most recently, Grubb (2013) analyzed videos of 22 students’ responding to questions about developmental education. He had students in five of the developmental classes he observed

interview other students in those classes on videotape as part of an assignment requiring students to interview students. The questions he gave students to ask other students were intended to elicit students' general perceptions about themselves and good teaching. Accordingly, the questioning was not researcher-led and sought only to confirm congruence with the perceptions of developmental education Grubb developed through his observations. His findings in this regard suggest that (a) students did not take high school seriously, and (b) students agreed that remedial pedagogy is boring and a waste of time. Additionally, Grubb's analysis of the videos affirmed Cox's (2009) findings (discussed below) that (a) students avoid engaging in coursework because they are afraid of being confirmed a "dumbass" or "stupid," and (b) students are more likely to engage in coursework if they can see how it connects to their professional goals. Regardless, without interviewing students to understand the ways they experienced the courses that were observed, Grubb (1999, 2010, 2011, 2013) could not illuminate how students approached their coursework, why some met with success and others failure after experiencing the same enacted pedagogy, or how professors' pedagogical approaches (remedial pedagogy or not) actually shape student outcomes.

Whereas Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) assessed how professors influence the context of students' classroom experiences through course-level pedagogical and curricular decisions, few classroom-level investigations have elicited students' perspectives on their developmental learning experience (e.g. Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Hull et al., 1991). Callahan and Chumney (2009) observed equivalent developmental English courses at both an urban-serving community college and a nearby research university with a transfer agreement to understand how learning experiences might differ between institutions in what are supposed to be identical courses. Their findings corroborated Grubb's (1999, 2010, 2013) research; whereas

the remedial pedagogy practiced by the professor at the community college did not prepare students for college-level coursework, the pedagogy of the professor observed at the research university, which emphasized extracting meaning from reading and conveying meaning through writing, did. The researchers concluded that the student-centered pedagogy enacted at the research university better positioned students for success in the developmental education course and beyond (Callahan & Chumney, 2009). However, their interviews with students focused on applicability of what they learned in their developmental course to subsequent college-level courses and mostly ignored how students engaged in the respective enacted pedagogies. Accordingly, Callahan and Chumney did not uncover the difficulties students might have accessing the pedagogy enacted in their classrooms.

Hull et al. (1991) found that one professor's expectation for certain social behaviors in the classroom shaped how she understood her students' academic abilities. The researchers observed one student who did not follow the dominant discourse pattern—professor question, students answer, professor evaluation—in a developmental English classroom, which in turn prompted the professor to marginalize the student's participation throughout the semester. In this case, the professor's perceptions about the student's cognitive deficiencies were so pervasive that the professor could not reconcile what she thought was the student's "thinking level [that] seems to be so scattered" with the student's writing, "which is not really too bad" (p. 310). Regardless, the professor insisted that the student would not pass college-level English "because it requires coherent thinking" (p. 310). The professor's negative perspective of the student powerfully shaped her academic identity; by the end of the class, the student reported that despite her speech team membership in high school and love of writing, she came to understand herself as having problems in English and was "not a very good speaker" (p. 317).

Hull et al. (1991) demonstrated how a professor's understandings of students shapes his or her pedagogical approaches, which in turn shapes students' learning experiences. In this case, the professor's misunderstanding of the student's engagement negatively impacted the educational outcomes. However, Hull et al.'s research was comprised of one student's perspective, and thus provides little insight into what, if any, similarities there are among student approaches to coursework in developmental education.

Cox's (2009) classroom-level investigations of mostly college-level composition courses uncovered a wider range of misunderstandings between professors and students. The students Cox interviewed articulated logic of action that was squarely concerned with the teacher/student relationship. Her findings suggest that students underperform for fear of having the academic inadequacy they suspect of themselves being objectively recognized. For example, Cox reported that a student might not turn in an assignment for fear of receiving a failing grade, yet consider the failing implications of not turning in the assignment as successfully postponing the confirmation of inadequacy, and thus preserving their ability to retake the course. Cox reported that professors' frustrations and confusion grow as they come to misunderstand this fear-driven student behavior as demonstration of cognitive or motivational deficiencies. The misunderstanding between students and professors becomes self-fulfilling as professors' frustrations result in less engagement with students, which unintentionally exacerbates students' fears of being an outsider and doomed to fail.

Importantly, Cox (2009) reported that the students she interviewed explained how professors who "come down to [their] level" and attempt to reflectively understand the ways students "emotionally and cognitively" interact with the curriculum tend to assuage students' fear and increase their success in the course (p. 114). Accordingly, professors can have a positive

impact by inspiring confidence, holding students to high standards, and validating students' college-going ability.

Cox's (2009) findings demonstrate that the way students experience their education in the context of the pedagogical relationship shapes how they engage with the course, professor, and ultimately their own learning. In this way, Cox's research represents an important contribution to understanding one aspect of why developmental education students may never make it to a college-level course; namely, their "fear, feelings of being overwhelmed, and confusion about assignments" lead them to act in counterproductive ways (p. 161).

However, Cox's (2009) research was comprised of six college-level courses and only one developmental course. Accordingly, the findings were coalesced mostly from students who successfully navigated developmental education or were never deemed underprepared for college-level coursework, and thus did not necessarily detail the experiences of the almost two-thirds of students who never make it to a college-level course.

In sum, the extant literature highlights that enacted pedagogy shapes students' engagement in a course, and how students' engage shapes outcomes. However, the available evidence provides an incomplete picture of how students come to succeed or fail in their developmental coursework. For example, Grubb (1999, 2010, 2013) illuminated the state of pedagogical practices inside the developmental classroom, but does not uncover how students' approached their coursework, nor how these approaches interacted with the pedagogies he described. Hull et al.'s (1991) research was comprised of one student's perspective, and thus provided little insight into how that professor's teaching helped to facilitate success or failure for the other students in her class. Finally, Cox's (2009) research focused mostly upon students who

already made it to a college-level coursework, thus not necessarily illuminating the phenomenon (or phenomena) producing attrition in developmental education.

### **Developmental Education Reform Policies**

Despite the robust evidence that students' learning experiences in developmental education shape their success or failure, most reform policy initiatives do not address what happens in the classroom. In fact, many local and state-level developmental education reforms have left the classroom untouched, focusing instead on limiting students' exposure to developmental education and/or instituting learning community initiatives. Policies that aim to limit students' exposure to developmental education have attempted to ameliorate the problem of students' attrition by limiting students' enrollment in developmental education through mainstreaming or compression policies (Edgecombe, 2011). Mainstreaming is the practice of enrolling students who are deemed underprepared in college-level courses and providing them with various classroom and institutional-level supports to pass the course. Compression is the practice of combining two or more developmental education courses below college-level into one course.

Notable examples of mainstreaming can be observed at the state level in Connecticut and Florida. In 2012 Connecticut passed a law banning most developmental education from public colleges allowing only one semester of a developmental courses (Inside Higher Ed, 2012). The bill requires student who need developmental education to enroll in credit-bearing courses in which developmental education is embedded, including additional help meeting the requirements of the course. While the legislation requires colleges to use local discretion to execute the law (i.e. class sizes, professor/student ratios, etc.), it nonetheless limits developmental education across the state to one course below college-level.

Another example of a mainstreaming policy is Florida's recently passed law requiring the state's 28 community colleges to give students the option of enrolling in developmental education (Fain, 2013). In 2014, students enrolling in Florida community colleges will be able to elect to take developmental education if they so choose, but cannot be required to do so. Additionally, the law mandates that students will no longer be required to take a placement tests, as students will be considered prepared for college by virtue of their high school diploma.

While the impact of these state-level policies will not be known for some time, local mainstreaming policies suggest that helping students avoid developmental education is better than enrolling them in it. Soliday and Gleason's (Gleason, 2000; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997) analysis of their CCNY Enrichment project suggested that students who were placed into college-level English course with support and culturally relevant curriculum generally developed the skills necessary to write college-level essays. However, their analysis did not indicate how many of the 365 students in the sample passed their college-level course, and it is unclear to what extent students were successful because they avoided remedial pedagogy (Grubb, 1999).

In a recent example of compression, the Community College of Denver (CCD) compressed two or more levels of developmental education, thus accelerating the time it takes for student enrolled in developmental education to make to a college-level course (Baker, 2011). The initiatives showed great promise at CCD, where 47% students taking the compressed course completed their developmental education requirements and enrolled in a college-level course compared to only 24% of students enrolled in the traditional developmental sequence (Baker, 2011). Despite the relative success of the compression initiative at CCD, most students (53%) did not complete their developmental course. Considering that 72% of the students in Bailey et



al.'s (2010) national sample who skipped their developmental education referral altogether passed their first college-level course, the CCD students would have likely been better off with a mainstreaming initiative.

Mainstreaming and/or compression policies are aimed at fixing the problem of developmental education while ignoring the value—either on short-term metrics (i.e. passing a college-level course) or longer-term metrics (i.e. degree attainment). Indeed, the evidence suggests that developmental education levels the playing field for students who would not otherwise be successful in college-level coursework (Bahr, 2010a; Bahr, 2008; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010). In fact, while Bailey et al. (2010) found that the students who skip their developmental education referral passed their first college-level course at almost three times the rate of students who enrolled in a developmental course, the students still experienced a lower passing rate than those who successfully passed through their developmental sequence.

An equally popular reform initiative at the local level is to institute learning communities. A learning community is “co-registration” or “block scheduling” of students in the same course (Tinto, 1998, p. 2). The organization of learning communities can range from enrollment of students in the same two courses to more comprehensive arrangements whereby students are co-enrolled in two or more courses, live in the same dormitories, and have requirements for other shared experiences (i.e. cultural events, student services programming, etc.). The central organizing idea of learning communities is that they provide students with opportunities to engage socially in college life, which is widely believed to improve persistence to graduation (i.e. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

The use of learning communities at the community college level for developmental education has been the focus of several local reforms and analyses (i.e. Barnes & Piland, 2013; Malnarich, 2005; Raftery, 2005; Tinto, 1998; Weissman, Cullinan, Cerna, Safran, & Richman, 2012). Learning community initiatives for developmental education at community colleges generally require students to enroll in needed developmental education course in cohorts that combine an academic success course and/or tutoring requirement (i.e. Barnes & Piland, 2013; Raftery, 2005; Weissman et al., 2012). Analyses of these initiatives have suggested that learning communities have a modest positive impact at best.

Perhaps the most rigorous analysis of learning community initiatives in community college developmental education is Weissman et al.'s (2012) analysis of Merced College and the Community College of Baltimore County. As part of the Learning Communities Demonstration Project, the impact study of these colleges was based on a quasi-experimental design whereby students who were referred to developmental English were randomly assigned to courses with and without a learning community structure. Both colleges in the study linked developmental reading and writing (separate components of developmental English) along with a college-level course from another discipline and an academic success component. For students who enrolled in developmental English with the learning community structure, the researchers found no discernable impact on (a) students' pass rates in developmental English, (b) post-program registration, or (c) total credits earned.

In light of the extent literature, current reform policies aimed at mainstreaming, compressing, or enrolling students in learning communities seem misguided. In the case of mainstreaming and compression, the policies do not account for the importance of developmental education in student success. Moreover, none of the policies, and resulting

structural changes, addresses much of what is known about how students succeed or fail in developmental education. The policies either simply bypass needed learning experiences for students or co-register them in courses that likely have the more fundamental problems illuminated by the literature reviewed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

In order to better understand how students' learning experiences in developmental English shape success or failure, I focused my investigation on learning how students experience content and pedagogy and how students respond to these experiences. I conducted a semester long qualitative study of three sections of developmental English at USCC (an urban-serving community college). I observed every class session of each section for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and then one class per section each week for the remainder of the semester, documenting 126 hours of classroom interactions with detailed field notes. In addition to classroom observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all three professors twice; during spring break and after the semester, and a total of 23 student participants across all three sections.

A qualitative approach was appropriate to understand how participants' actions in the classroom were motivated by individual worldviews, how these actions were interpreted by the worldviews of others, and how the shared experiences of individuals produced multiple realities (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this way, my overall approach was intended to illuminate the reality participants created from a social constructivist perspective (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). That is, professors and students "develop subjective meanings," which are "negotiated socially" through "historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Accordingly, data collection and analysis focused on understanding the participants' perspectives of their teaching and learning experiences, and the ways these perspectives shaped their actions. Fundamentally, I attempted to "get closer to the actor's perspective through detailed interviewing

and observations” in order to understand how actors’ interpretations of their lived experience influence their actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 10).

### **Site**

Because of my interest in understanding how non-White, low SES students come to meet with success or failure in developmental education, I selected a large, multi-site, urban-serving community college (USCC) with a high concentration of low SES, minority students. USCC, which is located in the center of a large Northeastern city, has over 18,000 degree-seeking students who are mostly Black (57%) or Latino (8%). Further, the majority of students are 25 years of age or older and female. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of all students attending USCC in 2011 received Pell grant aid averaging more than \$5,000. Additionally, in the fall of 2011, USCC referred roughly 65% of all incoming students to developmental English coursework and more than 45% to developmental math. According to internal research at USCC, less than half (46%) of students who enrolled in developmental courses successfully completed college-level course within 3 years.

Importantly, Maxwell (2005) has enumerated four potential goals of purposeful selection, two of which are interrelated and pertinent to my selection of USCC: typicality and deliberateness. First, I selected USCC because the socioeconomic and non-White status of the students who enroll is known in the existing literature to be typical of the students who are not likely to succeed in developmental education and enroll in a college-level course. Second, selecting a site typical of the focal phenomenon allowed me to “deliberately examine” the nature of the phenomenon in “extreme cases” (i.e. not typical of all developmental English courses at all community colleges) (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). In other words, selecting USCC as my site allowed me to examine the context where a vast majority of lower SES Black and Latino

students enroll in developmental education, which in turn allowed me to see and explore the phenomenon in a way that I could not elsewhere (i.e. a suburban community college with lower developmental placement, and relatively higher success rates).

Developmental English at USCC is primarily offered as linked, six credit hour courses comprised of reading and writing components. USCC uses COMPASS to place students in combinations of developmental reading and/or writing depending upon cutoff scores determined by the administration. There are three levels of developmental English, which could include a credit bearing English composition (101) linked with a non-credit bearing developmental reading (099 or 108).

The three levels begin with placement in 5-week workshops to develop students' reading comprehension and grammar skills. After students complete the 5-week workshop, they need to retake the placement test and score above the cutoff to be enrolled in the second level of developmental English, 098 (developmental composition) and 099 (developmental reading). These courses are followed by English 101 (college-level composition) and English 108 (developmental reading), respectively. Accordingly, a student who is still deemed unprepared for college-level reading can be enrolled in a linked, college-level English (101) and developmental reading (108).

Table 1

*Level of Developmental English at USCC*

1 Level Below College Level	Developmental Writing 098	Developmental Reading 108
2 Levels Below College Level	Developmental Writing Workshop	Developmental Reading 099
3 Levels Below College Level		Developmental Reading Workshop

## Participants

I chose to observe three sections of developmental English at USCC in order to conduct within-case and cross-cases analyses aimed at “deepen[ing] understanding and explanation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 173). In this way, multiple professors (and their classrooms) yielded data of similarities and differences that positioned me to build theory around the ways that developmental students learned in response to teaching. Perhaps more importantly, my decisions about what three professors to include in the study was based upon fairly clear evidence from previous scholarship that suggests conventional “skill and drill” or remedial pedagogy produces student disengagement and classroom environments void of meaningful learning (Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013). Since I wanted to understand how students meet with success or failure I avoided observing professors who used remedial pedagogy in their classroom. Accordingly, I worked to select three developmental English professors whose approach to teaching engaged students, and thus allowed me to observe how students understood and responded to the enacted pedagogies.

My process for selecting professor participants was primarily aimed at finding three volunteers who retained and passed students at average or above average rates and demonstrated some “constructivist” or student-centered pedagogical approach (Grubb, 1999, 2010). More specifically, I sought professors whom I believed approached their teaching in ways that acknowledged student learning as a process of building upon prior understandings (Bransford et al., 1999). Indeed, central to the research design was a purposeful selection of professors who developed pedagogical relationships that could “illuminate what was going on” in student success “in a way that representative cases [could] not” (i.e. skill and drill pedagogy) (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90).

To select the three professor participants, I first approached the director of developmental education at USCC 2 years prior to the study and asked her to refer me to developmental English professors who, in her estimation, effectively taught developmental courses. She provided names of professors who she believed “worked wonders” with developmental students based primarily upon abnormally high retention and pass rates. Through this process, the director introduced me to Professor Rose. I approached Professor Rose about participating in a pilot study in her college composition/developmental reading classroom the following year, and she agreed. During the pilot study I learned that Professor Rose voluntarily participated in a *teaching circle* (professors meeting for professional development to discuss pedagogical successes and challenges). I explained to her that I intended to include three sections of linked developmental English courses in my study and that I wanted to recruit two other professors who approached their teaching in ways similar to her way. Using a snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I asked her to introduce me to professors whom she thought would be a good fit for my study. Professor Rose introduced me to Professor Kelly, who, through a similar process, introduced me to Professor Smith.

After being introduced to a professor, I explained my project and—if they were interested—asked whether I could assess their fit for participation based upon an informal interview and a preliminary classroom observation. During the informal interviews I asked professors to describe their approach to teaching developmental English, as well as his or her views regarding developmental students and their learning. In the preliminary classroom observations, I looked for demonstrations of engaging pedagogical relationships that were co-created by the professor and his or her students (rather than a professor-teaching-to-student paradigm).



Over the course of a year, I identified and recruited three professors whom I thought would provide a range of student-centered teaching (Grubb, 1999). Along the way, I immediately ruled out any professors who featured a workbook as the primary content of their curriculum, as well as professors who indicated in any way that they understood their role as “weeding out” students who were not college material. The professors I did select generally, (a) described their approach to teaching as holding high expectations for their students’ learning, (b) understood student failure, at least in large part, as their failure to teach those students effectively, and (c) believed that students would learn how to read and write by reading and writing. Additionally, the professors’ classrooms had robust professor/student interactions around content other than grammar skills, and their course assignments expected students to practice college-level literacy (i.e. write college-level essays), rather than demonstrating knowledge of discrete skills.

Importantly, my focus on exploring teaching and learning dynamics in developmental English at USCC meant that I ultimately made my decisions about professor participants based upon their pedagogy, rather than what section of developmental English they were assigned to teach for the semester of the project (spring). Accordingly, it turned out that I observed two sections of linked college composition/developmental reading and one section of a linked developmental writing/reading. (Note: All students in both sections of linked composition/developmental reading were previously placed, enrolled, and passed at least one linked developmental writing/reading.)

Table 2 lists the three professor participants, the course they taught during the study, as well as the number of students enrolled, the number of students who were still enrolled at the end of the semester, and the number of students who passed the course.

Table 2

*Professor Participants and Course Outcomes*

Name	Course	Enrolled	Retained	Passed Composition	Passed Reading
Professor Smith	101/108	23	17	11	14
Professor Rose	101/108	22	14	5	5+ (missing data)
Professor Kelly	098/099	19	14	14	14

Finally, all student participants were selected based upon two criteria: (a) they were enrolled in one of the three linked sections of developmental English selected for participation, and (b) they volunteered to participate in the study.

Recruiting student participants began with introducing myself formally to all the students on the first day of class, as each professor gave me time to tell the students who I was, the details of my project, the parameters of participation, and the steps I was taking to ensure their confidentiality. In these introductions I stressed the fact that I, too, was a student and working on a research paper that I needed to complete to meet my program's requirements. I also gave each student a flyer outlining the project that highlighted the fact that only I would know the identity of participants and what they said, and asking the students to provide contact information if they were willing to be interviewed at the end of the semester (see Appendix A for student flyer). Several students volunteered right away, and others decided to participate as the semester progressed. In all, 23 students participated (see Appendix B for list of student participants).

In Professor Smith's class I interviewed 8 of the 17 students who did not drop the class before the end of the semester (47%). In Professor Rose's class I interviewed 8 of the 14 students who did not drop the class before the end of the semester (57%). In Professor Kelly's class I interviewed 7 of the 14 students who did not drop the class before the end of the semester (50%). In my interviews with students I asked them to identify their race/ethnicity, as well as if they

would tell me their grades after they were posted (see Appendix A for a list of student participants, racial identity, gender, and final grades).

### **Data Collection**

Since I was interested in learning how students approached their coursework and how these approaches interacted with the pedagogy enacted in their classroom, I primarily relied upon two methods to understand social context and action; participant observations and participant interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2009).

#### **Participant Observations**

I observed every class session for all three linked sections for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and then one class per section each week for the remainder of the semester. All three linked classes were 2 hours long. In all, I observed roughly half of the total class time for each linked section (42 of 82 hours each) for a total of 126 hours of classroom observations across all three courses. For each observation I took detailed field notes during the class and typed them (usually within 24-48 hours), adding detail to my shorthand as I went.

The bulk of my observational efforts was to observe how students and professors “create and understand their daily lives” in developmental English (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 31). While my approach to the classroom observations was not predetermined, it was informed by the pilot study I conducted with Professor Rose in the spring semester of the year before. Based upon my pilot study and preliminary data analysis, I pursued observations with two major foci. First, at the beginning of the semester I focused on the language, actions, and documents (e.g. syllabus, grading rubrics, etc.) the professors used to communicate (explicitly or not) their expectations for students’ learning. As importantly, as the professors established their expectations for students I began listening and looking for the ways students responded and/or

negotiated (explicitly or not) their role as learners in the classroom. These observations included students' verbal exchanges with the professors; students' discussions amongst themselves, as well as their informal conversations with me; their body language; and classroom behaviors (e.g. timeliness, participation, sleeping on the desk, using mobile phones, etc.). My early observations were aimed at documenting the social basis upon which pedagogical relationships were established.

Second, as the semester progressed, I shifted my observational focus to the nature of the pedagogical relationships formed between the professors and students, their evolving dynamics, and the role they played in shaping participants' teaching and learning experiences. Here, I was listening for the language the professors used to communicate both ongoing expectations for students, as well as any feedback (or lack of) given to students regarding their progress and learning. Further, I focused on the professors' actions engaging students and enacting instructional activities to document my understanding of the professors' pedagogical intent, and students' learning experiences. Additionally, my ongoing observations of students focused on the language they used to engage with the professor, course content, and each other in order to document how they came to understand themselves as developmental English students. Similarly, I was attentive to the students' learning behaviors (i.e. attendance patterns, completing assignments, participating in classwork, asking content questions, etc.) in order to document their approaches to the course, as well as any changes in their approaches during the semester. The aim of my ongoing observations was to understand how both professors and students came to interpret their relationship with one another, and document areas of harmony, conflict, and/or misunderstanding.

All three classes were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8am, 10:15am, and 1:20pm, respectively. For my observations, I spent the entire day on campus beginning with arriving to the first class early (7:30am) and staying well after the last class was over (sometimes until 4pm). As part of my observational protocol I developed and maintain researcher/informant relationships with the professors, as well as many of the students. The nature of these relationships was casual and ongoing, as I arrived early and stayed late around class sessions to socialize with the participants. Additionally, I occasionally ate lunch with students I was observing or one of the three participating professors. In these interactions with participants outside of the classes I was able to field test emerging findings, gain insight into my classroom observations, and document individual experiences over the course of the semester (more on this below).

### **Participant Interviews**

As Maxwell (2005) has argued, observations alone do not provide an account of how participants understand their actions and the actions of others. Accordingly, in addition to classroom observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all three professors and 23 students. I interviewed each professor twice with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The first interviews were conducted during spring break in order to compare inferences I was making from my observational data with the professors' perspectives (Maxwell, 2005). This helped ensure that I understood the pedagogical intent of the professors as I engaged in preliminary analysis and developed the protocol for student interviews. I conducted the second professor interviews after the semester and my interviews with students concluded. The final professor interviews allowed me to explore some of the students' understandings about the

professors' pedagogy, as well as uncover how professors interpreted students' actions during the course, and how these interpretations influenced their pedagogical actions.

I conducted 23 student interviews in public spaces on the USCC campus, each lasting between 40 and 75 minutes. I developed the student interview protocol after preliminary analysis of classroom observational data and first professor interviews. By that time it was clear that I needed to collect data on how the students' understanding of what they needed to do to be successful changed during the course of the semester, and how their professor's teaching activities shaped their understanding. As importantly, I sought to uncover the differences between what the professors intended for students to learn and what students actually took away from the class. Accordingly, I asked students how they understood the professor's expectations of them, how they approached their coursework, and how they assessed their learning experience in the course.

### **Course Documents**

In addition to observations and interviews, I wrote 11 analytic memos during the course of the semester and collected over 100 pages of course documents handed out to students (i.e. syllabi, assignment sheets, quizzes, tests, rubrics, etc.). I used the analytic memos to document my theoretical perspectives and insights from contradictions and similarities I observed in the classrooms. The memos provided a place for me to document what I thought was going on in the classroom so that I could try to confirm or disconfirm my working theories with participants in the field.

The course documents were collected rather easily. Since I attended more than three quarters of the class sessions, I generally received the handouts with the students. For the handouts given to students during the class sessions I did not attend, I asked the professors each

week to provide me with copy of everything they handed out that week. The course documents proved vital to the analysis because they gave me insights into the expectations of the professors, and how students interpreted the course requirements.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Early and Ongoing Data Analysis**

Data analysis generally focused on understanding both students' and professors' emic perspectives, as well as etic analytic themes that emerged across data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process started during the data collection phase as I reviewed field notes from classroom observations and wrote analytic memos documenting my ongoing theoretical reflections. In the early stages of data collection, I used these preliminary analyses to identify emergent findings that I could field test in future observations, as well as "member check" by asking participants about their understandings during my many informal conversations with them (Creswell, 2009). As data collection progressed, I used this process to identify areas where further data collection was needed to understand the phenomena I was observing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

In one example of identifying areas for further data collection, I made note of the fact that in Professor Smith's classroom it seemed as though students sat mostly silent during group work assignments; indeed, most of my early observations of group activity in this class simply noted the time that had elapsed. Curious if the students thought it was a waste of time also, I asked Aliyah during a break if she got anything out of the silence. She quickly informed me that group work was important for her because she could see what other students were doing, and thus make sure she was on the "right track" with her work. I documented this conversation in my field notes and renewed my efforts in future classroom observations to see what Aliyah was seeing. It turned

out that I was missing complex interactions between students in which simple verbal responses were used to confirm or disconfirm the rightness or wrongness of their answers through consensus. Once I understood how this worked, I came to understand the practice as aiding the class participation of students who did not or were not able to read the assigned text, as well as helping group members understand right and wrong ways to write about their ideas in their essays.

Similarly, the concurrent collection and analysis also enabled me to draw upon my understanding of the participants' experiences to develop interview protocols that would assist me in understanding the participants' perspectives in a way that could confirm or disconfirm my inferences (Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, I drew upon earlier data collection and analyses to develop interview questions that could fill in the gaps in my understanding about the participants' experiences. For example, in my interview with Michael he explained to me that he did not understand the grading system that Professor Smith was using to indicate progress made (PM) towards a passing grade, but not an outright failing grade—a “no-grade” of sorts. I realized that I did not understand the Professor's approach in this regard either. Accordingly, I made note of my (and the student's) confusion and included a relevant question in the final professor interview protocol to explore the topic.

### **Coding**

Ultimately, data collection resulted in 58 documented classroom session observations, six professor interviews, 23 student interviews, 11 analytic memos, and over 100 pages of course documents that were handed out to students (i.e. syllabi, assignment sheets, quizzes, tests, rubrics, etc.). After all of these data were collected, I sent the 29 interviews out for professional transcription. After the interviews were transcribed, I read each transcript while listening to the



original audio to ensure accuracy. Through this process, I identified preliminary themes that formed the basis of a code book that I used to begin a more systematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2009; MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After reviewing the interviews for accuracy, I uploaded them into NVivo 9 along with the detailed field notes and analytic memos. I then coded the entire data set looking for “patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events repeat[ing] and [or] stand[ing] out” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). I paid particular attention to “repetitions,” “similarities and differences,” and “transitions” that were evident in the interview transcripts (Ryan & Bernard, 2007).

During this second pass of the data, I began coding the data crudely with the analytic themes I noticed repeated while I was listening to the interviews. My aim in the second pass was to chunk the data using descriptive codes with very little interpretation so that I could reach more manageable subsets of data for interpretative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through this process, several codes deteriorated as a closer look at the data revealed that themes of original interest were not prevalent across the data set. For example, one of my first codes was Cultural Conflict, which I defined as examples of disagreement between a professor and student(s) about the meaning of words, events, or ideas. One such disagreement surfaced in my field notes when a student used the term *stack* to refer to saving money, and Professor Rose quipped that she does not understand slang. Another student promptly referred her to UrbanDictionary.com to “learn the definition.” Professor Rose retorted, “no, you can go to AmericanHeritage.com and learn the [Standard English version of the] word.” While this exchange was interesting, there were few such exchanges across the data, no discussion of such disagreement by students or professors in

the interviews, and little evidence that this conflict was material to students' learning experiences. Accordingly, I eliminated the code.

Conversely, other analytic themes (and requisite codes) emerged in the context of the entire data set. For example, High School Experiences was not an initial code; however, as I noticed that students regularly described their experiences in their developmental English course in reference to their high school experiences, I developed the code to apply on the next pass.

After chunking the larger data set into these descriptive code subsets, I reviewed each coding category beginning with the largest (i.e. most references) to develop pattern codes within each descriptive code (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My aim with the pattern codes was to achieve units of data that provided a sense of "what is happening and why" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 65). To this end, in my third and fourth coding passes I collapsed descriptive codes that held similar pattern attributes, substantially expanded other pattern codes, and refined several pattern codes to better account for the students' learning experiences in their developmental English course.

For example, I refined the initial High School Experiences code to only account for high school experiences that directly shaped students learning experiences in developmental English because many descriptions of high school were not relevant to the analysis. Accordingly, the new code, High School Comparisons retained only some of the data initially coded with the old criteria. For example, at first I coded the following data in my interview with Jennifer as High School Experiences,

I graduated from [North City Alternative].... It's a disciplinary school. I got kicked out of [North City High] because I had a knife on me. I didn't mean to have the knife on me. It was just in my bag from being outside of school. And

they found it in my bag... They didn't even tell me I was going to get expelled, I just come in and found out, like "You gotta go." I was like, "Wait. What?" They was like "No, you're out of here. Pick a school." ...[Then when I got to North City Alternative] ...they just said, "You're a senior. Here's your schedule." And, I'm like "Well, don't I have a senior project?" They was like, "Yeah, it should've been due." I'm like, "Well, why aint you been tell me?" So they gave me an extension date and it was just like a month that I had to do a senior project.

While this experience was likely a formative one for Jennifer, it did not illuminate her learning experience in developmental English. Accordingly, my application of the new code excluded data that did not directly account for how students experienced their developmental English course. Accordingly, data were included under the new code if they described the differences between (a) the coursework in high school and developmental English, (b) differences between the academic expectations in high school and developmental English, and (c) differences between assessments and grading in high school and developmental English. For example, in my interview with Sofia I asked, "did you learn essay structure in high school?" She responded:

Yeah, we did. But we mainly did book reports and, "Here's a topic. Write a 2-page essay about it." Whenever we got it back, it would just talk about grammar and stuff, or like add a topic here.... It's a good [high] school, but like here [at USCC], with [Professor Kelly], she taught me a lot. I learned a lot from her.... I learned how to make an essay outline and how to brainstorm for an essay, which now I know how to make a bigger essay with the brainstorming. I never really did the brainstorming in high

school, I never knew how to do it. So, I guess that's what the big thing was, was the writing process I got out of there [Professor Kelly's developmental English course].

These data were coded High School Comparisons because they described the students learning experience in developmental English by comparing the coursework (book reports), expectations (write about a topic), and assessments (essays returned with grammar corrections) of high school with the coursework (essays), expectations (bigger essay, which required brainstorming), and assessments (whereby passing required "the writing process") in developmental English.

Ultimately, coding resulted in 11 codes with analytic viability. That is, 11 pattern codes emerged across all data sources that accounted for the themes central to the participants' experiences in the courses (see Appendix D for code book). The findings detailed in Chapter IV focus on the shared learning experiences of students across all three classrooms using only a subset of three analytic codes: High School Comparisons (students' understanding of their developmental English coursework compared to their high school coursework), Students' Strategies (students' approaches to passing the course), and Teaching/Learning Literacy Practice (explicit how-to direction from professors or a tutor about college-level writing).

I decided to use these three codes because passing and failing the course fundamentally hinged upon a student's ability to revise their essays to meet their professor's expectations for college-level writing, and these codes captured the data that explained how students did or did not develop the ability to revise. More specifically, over half of the data reported in the next chapter was coded High School Comparisons as the students' central experience in developmental English was failing essay assignments approaching coursework the same way

they did in high school. The other two codes, Student Strategies and Teaching/Learning Literacy served supporting roles. Student Strategies provided the data necessary to understand how students responded to the failure (i.e. sought help during office hours, met with a tutor, etc.). Teaching/Learning Literacy provided the data necessary to understand the how-to instructions that students received/relied upon to develop their ability to revise in ways that would meet their professor's expectations (i.e. write the body first and the thesis last, read the essay aloud before submitting, etc.).

### **Within-case Analysis**

During the fourth coding pass, I set up within-case data displays using a matrix that simply listed out the student participant according to their class and the corresponding data from the focal pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was an iterative process. I began by trying to place several pattern codes next to each other attempting to see relationships. My first several attempts were failures, as the inferences I made about the relationships between codes were not supported when I revisited the context of the larger data set. Through this process, I continued to change the data displays until I could make some data-supported claim, such as "all students in case one are..." In this way, I used an analytic induction approach to understand how participants' actions were shaped by their understandings and context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Importantly, during this process, I allowed negative cases to stand as long as I could explain their exception plausibly. This turned out to help me develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon I was observing. For example, in Chapter IV I describe how students' K-12 experiences shaped an approach to learning focused on quickly completing assignments and turning them in. This finding initially emerged from students who reported never writing an essay in high school. However, there were several students who had written

essays in high school, but had similar difficulty understanding what the revision process was and how to use it to develop their writing ability. As I explored this contradiction in the data display and revisited the data set to reread the individual narratives, I realized that the students' shared difficulty was born out of their experiences with assessments in K-12, where their teachers neither graded their work (essays or not) on content nor introduced them to the revision process.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

Having developed three within-case data displays using pattern codes common to the entire data set, I began to develop case-ordered matrix displays to pursue cross-case analysis of how students' learning experiences were both similar and different among the three classes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By comparing different pedagogies with the students' learning experiences, my aim was to develop "more sophisticated descriptions" of the role pedagogy might play in developmental students' learning and success (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 172). Since each classroom had a unique context produced by its participants, I first sought to establish a display of the teaching context in each classroom and then relevant student learning experiences pertaining to each case. In the same way that I approached the within-case analysis, I used the case ordered data display to make "contrasts and comparisons" across the cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 190). Iteratively, I made tentative conclusions about what was going on in each of the three cases and then compared these conclusions with the larger data set to test if the claim was supported. Through this process, I was first able to make data-supported claims about the cases individually, and then consider the implications of the similarities and differences for participants' learning experiences across the cases.

## Drawing Conclusions

In order to draw conclusions and generate meaning I relied primarily on the approaches suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Drawing on pattern code data distilled into within-case and cross-case matrix displays, I sought to (a) “note patterns and themes,” (b) “see plausibility,” (c) “make contrasts and comparisons,” (d) “build a logical chain of evidence,” and (e) “make conceptual/theoretical coherence” (pp. 245, 246).

As previously discussed, the first step in generating meaning was to establish matrix data displays in order to note patterns and themes among participants’ experiences. After creating these data displays, patterns and themes emerged quickly given the relatively uniformed data. As I drew conclusions about the meaning of each pattern or theme that emerged, I would test its plausibility by returning to the larger data set (i.e. pattern code report, individual student interview, etc.) to see if the implications of the pattern or theme held true when compared to the larger data set. During this iterative process I relied heavily upon contrasting and comparing to test my conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). More specifically, I sought to answer the question, what similarities or differences would be present in the aggregate data if my claim was valid?

Testing the plausibility of my inferences in this way oftentimes resulted in seeing a much more complex and nuanced reality in the data. Accordingly, in an iterative process, I adjusted my understanding (claim) to account for the additional complexity, revisited the data display to assess the fit of the new claim to the existing patterns and themes, and then returned again to the aggregate data to retest the claim by contrasting and comparing what I thought I found to what the data suggested. This process continued until my understanding of a phenomenon was both plausible and supported by the data.

After iteratively building data displays, noting patterns and themes, seeing plausibility, drawing tentative conclusions, and testing plausibility, I built a “logical chain of evidence” by employing “if-then tactics” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 260). That is, I wrote out my claim using the formula “if that were true, then I should also find X” (p. 260). As the answer to this question was confirmed or disconfirmed by the data, I made adjustments to my understanding accordingly. Importantly, by the time I reached this point with any one finding, the adjustments were fairly small. Accordingly, building a logical chain of evidence served the purpose of making minor adjustments to my thinking as I began to draft the findings chapters.

### **Validity**

To avoid threats to validity, I gathered, analyzed, and interpreted data in ways consistent with trying to understand what was going on in three sections of developmental English at USCC with as little interference from my biases as possible. To this end, I believe I was successful. Several features of the research design and execution, such as early and ongoing data analysis, member checking, dynamic coding, and testing plausibility of data display inferences with the larger data set helped me to stay focused on understanding the experiences of the participants (etic), rather than my own understandings (emic). In this way, I worked to achieve a high level of both descriptive and interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1992). That is, by ensuring the accuracy of the participants’ descriptions and preserving the context in which their perspectives were shaped, I am confident that my interpretations of their actions are reasonably accurate.

Still, in my efforts to “make conceptual/theoretical coherence,” as Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 261) suggested, I am keenly aware that ultimately the findings presented in the chapters that follow have a conceptual analogue, and therefore are the product of my reasoned interpretations using certain ways of seeing. Indeed, from a postmodernist perspective (Bogdan,



& Biklen, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) I—like my research participants—interpret context and the actions of others “from a certain position” (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007, p. 21). Since the theoretical validity of my findings, as Maxwell (1992) suggested, rests primarily upon the extent to which a reader is persuaded by the concepts I use, and how I use them, it seems appropriate to highlight the evolution of my certain position as the data collection and analysis progressed.

My original intent was to understand the ways that sociocultural conflicts between professors and students inhibited teaching and learning, and how pedagogical approaches might effectively navigate this conflict in order to achieve meaningful student learning (i.e. success in the course). As a participant observer, I brought ideas to my data collection (observations and interviews) that included a theoretical framework informed in part by Bourdieu and Passeron’s notion that social stratification is reproduced through formal education (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and Gee’s (1989, 2008) notion of the “dominant Discourse” (privileged discourse) dominating, and thus marginalizing, all “non-dominant Discourses” (marginalized discourses). In this way, my research questions originally centered upon identifying how differences between the middleclass culture of professors privileged in higher education and the marginalized underclass culture of students created conflict that impeded learning. More specifically, I had two sensitivities. First, I was sensitive to the ways that professors might incidentally misuse their position of power and authority in the teacher/student relationship to marginalize students’ approaches to learning (not unlike the findings of Hull et al., 1991). Second, I was sensitive to the ways that marginalized students might create a counter-culture that pushed back against the professors’ authority, and thus further eroding a functional teacher/student relationship (not unlike the findings of Willis, 1981).

In the end, these sensitivities were neither supported by the data nor my analysis. In fact, as my data collection progressed, I noticed that the data disconfirmed much of my theoretical thinking to that point; the participants' interactions were fairly harmonious and each demonstrated a high level of respect (knowingly and unknowingly) for one another. Importantly, my observations did not necessarily refute previous research on which my theoretical framework to that point was built, rather it just suggested that for the three classes I was observing, cultural conflict between professors and students was not primarily shaping their teaching and learning context, nor animating their actions. (Although, I have speculated that this might have been a result of recruiting "good" professors.) Accordingly, I began to ask new questions that were grounded in the observations I was making. These questions evolved into the research questions in Chapter I.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The analysis in this chapter focuses on the shared learning experiences of the sample of 23 students that I interviewed. Three students in the sample that enrolled in the linked composition/developmental reading course failed the developmental reading portion of the course, two of these students also failed the composition portion along with three other students in the sample, and I did not have grade data for one student. All seven students in the sample that enrolled in the linked developmental reading/composition course passed (see Appendix A for a list of student participants and grades).

For the 17 students who reported passing at least the composition portion of their course, success was essentially a matter of developing the capacity to revise an unacceptable draft of an essay assignment into a satisfactory one. The students' adoption of a new approach to writing essays that focused on revision hinged upon their professor's feedback and requirement to revise and resubmit the essay assignments. However, this process was complicated by students' expectations of earning a passing grade for simply submitting an essay regardless of how unsatisfactory it was. Additionally, five students reported that they were never able to revise their essays in ways that met with their professor's expectations. Their difficulties seemed to stem, at least in part, from continuing to approach their writing assignments as they did their high school coursework.

To illuminate the learning experiences of the 23 students in my sample and how these experiences shaped their success or failure I detail (a) how students' initial approaches to coursework were shaped by their high school experiences, (b) the disorientation students experienced when their initial approach to coursework resulted in failure, (c) the disorientation

students experienced with their professor's assessment practices, (d) the process students went through to adopt a new approach to their coursework, (e) how this adoption of a new approach was facilitated in part by the professors' assessment practices, and (f) the difficulties of one student who was unable to learn and adopt the revision practices necessary to meet his professor's expectations for college-level writing.

### **“I’ll Just Give You the D or the C to Pass”: The Quid Pro Quo Bargain in High School**

All 23 students I interviewed reported attending an urban high school in the same city where USCC was located. Additionally, whether a student attended a charter or public school, each described how the expectations of their work during the semester were significantly different than the expectations of their work in high school. In each interview, students described how, at some point during the semester, they came to this realization and concluded that the approaches to coursework that they used to pass through and graduate high school resulted in failure at USCC. The students found that, compared to their high school coursework, coursework at USCC was more challenging and required meeting criteria beyond turning something in to the instructor by a due date.

Twenty of the 23 students I interviewed described how easy and unchallenging they found their high school assignments across all of their classes. The other three students did not explicitly state that their high school assignments were either challenging or unchallenging. For the 20 students who described coursework that lacked any real challenge or opportunity to learn, they explained how class assignments centered upon completing what Jennifer described as “simple things to do.” Jennifer explained to me that in her 11th grade English class the teacher “would just give out random worksheets or like open book tests,” adding, “everything’s open book. It was all simple things to do.” Similarly, Angela described her experiences in high school

English as “not paying attention [and still passing]” and “never really [doing] nothing,” adding, “we used to just bust it up [joke around] with [the teacher].” In fact, 17 students explained during their individual interviews that they were not expected by their high school teachers (including their English teachers) to write a single essay. For these students, their high school English assignments were confined to rote drill “packets,” “testing” and creating “poster boards.” Only six of the 23 students I interviewed reported writing essays in high school English. These six students all described how getting a passing grade on their writing assignments required only quickly writing down their thoughts without regard to whether it made any sense or not, and submitting their work without revision.

In addition to easy and unchallenging high school assignments, 19 students explained how most students in their high school turned in little or no work at all because completing assignments was optional. For example, Shanice explained that, “in [the city] public school system, you don't have to do whatever you don't want to do” because students can drop out “legally, at 16.” Accordingly, students “don't have to get a [high school] diploma” because no one can force them to.

In Shanice’s experience, public high school students could choose to do work or not with seemingly little consequence. Since students did not have to turn in work if they did not want to, Shanice reported that many teachers simply quit asking students to complete assignments at all. In classes where teachers did continue to work with students by “hounding” them to turn in assignments, students “just [did not] go to that class.”

In high school, Shanice learned that since students did not regularly turn in assignments, simply meeting the criterion of *turned in* was an achievement worthy of a passing grade. In fact, turning in work in exchange for a passing grade, regardless of the quality of that work, became

an explicit pact between teachers and students in Shanice's high school. She explained how teachers would regularly bargain with students: "I'll just pass you on if you do this. If you do a certain amount of work by then, I'll just give you the D or the C to pass'."

Nineteen (19) of 23 students I interviewed discussed some version of Shanice's description of her teachers' basic bargain: "If you do a certain amount of work by then, I'll just give you the D or the C to pass." Accordingly, these students came to understand that academic success as a student was a matter of completing a certain amount of work, which they found easy or simple to do, and then meeting the sole criterion of turned in by a certain time (perhaps at a teacher's urging) in exchange for a passing grade. While the other four students did not explicitly discuss this basic bargain as part of their high school experience, all 23 students did describe how they came to USCC expecting to complete a certain amount of assigned work in exchange for a passing grade. Additionally, many or all of the students might have thought, as Michael did, that a D was a passing grade in developmental English as well.

All 23 students explained in their interviews how they expected the same *quid pro quo* arrangement Shanice described to govern teaching and learning activities in their developmental coursework at USCC. Each student described some variation of how they initially expected their developmental English coursework to comprise "simple" and "easy" "things to do," that they would quickly complete and turn in for passing grades according to the *quid pro quo* arrangement that was presumably well established in their high school. However, their high school arrangement did not hold true in their developmental English course at USCC.

### **Expectations in the Developmental English Courses**

The final grade for students in all three sections of developmental English focused on assessments of written assignments. In Professor Rose's course, assessments of writing in the

college composition portion comprised 70% of the total grade and 60% of the total grade in the developmental reading portion. In Professor Smith's course, assessments of writing in the college composition portion comprised 90% of the total grade and 60% of the total grade in the developmental reading portion. In Professor Kelly's course, assessments of writing in the developmental composition portion comprised 90% of the total grade and 60% in the developmental reading portion.

Central to the study's design was careful selection of professors who demonstrated a very high level of competency helping developmental English students meet high standards for college-level writing required for passing their course. In fact, all three professors explained in their formal interviews that their expectations for students were focused on helping them learn how to write college-level essays by teaching them to develop both their thinking and writing skills. For example, Professor Smith explained that he expected students to think deeply about the assigned readings in response to questions he asked in class:

I expected them to do the assigned reading and come in and be willing and able to engage in – not just summarizing what they've read, but thinking about how it relates to other issues, ideas, and authors we've read the whole semester.... to really further your own critical analysis at some point you have to have an idea, share it, and have someone respond to it... [My] questions are not designed to be, "you should know the answer to this when you walk in the room." My goal in asking that kind of question is to ideally... move students along in developing some sort of analysis of what they've read...[so they're not just] repeating stuff back, but [engaging in] higher order thinking, analysis and application.... I'm trying to get them to think about things and have ideas that they ultimately have something to write about.

Professor Smith's expectations for students' writing included critical analysis and original ideas. Accordingly, he built those types of questions into to his classroom discussion to help students develop ideas for their essay assignments. Both Professors Kelly and Rose also focused students' attention on a process of writing by dedicating considerable class time and instruction to features of the writing process that were central to developing essays that would meet with their expectations. For example, in our interview, Professor Rose reported that she insisted that students understand that writing an essay that meets her expectations required several key structural elements developed through a process of building components:

They [the steps to writing a paper] are so important. [When talking to the students] I'm like "you get the purpose of this right? You need a skeleton, or else you have nothing for your muscles to hang on. Like you have to have that." For research papers it's like every single component of it is blocked out in class time... There's a day for thesis statement, there's a day for outlines, there's a day for research...

All three professors held relatively high expectations of students meeting basic criteria for college-level academic writing that they articulated in class, on assignment sheets, and in rubrics. That is, the professors that I observed, detailed their expectations for college-level writing and then held students accountable for meeting those expectations through assessments. For example, Professor Kelly explained in her second interview how she consistently assessed students on the process of writing that she believed would develop their writing skills:

My rubric has, I forget how many things there are – analyze the writing situation, signs that they're using the full process – they have to hand in all their work and I'm looking for the process, essay structure – introduction, conclusion, paragraphs are focused on one idea and are supported, and that they know how to use feedback. I mean those are the



learning outcomes for the course, so I just made it my rubric. That's what I'm looking for every assignment, that they're focused on learning these things. Those are the priorities. And then I put check marks on it. And if it's between this one and this one, I put a check mark on the line and I calculate the number that way with a calculator, and whatever number it comes up to, I put it on there and I circle it.

While the expectations for writing assignments took on a slightly different look in each classroom, the professors generally provided students with an overview of each writing assignment and a rubric that detailed the elements of a “competent” essay. For example, Professor Kelly graded students using the rubric that detailed a passing essay as (a) “addressing the prompt,” (b) being “coherent” and using “essay and paragraph structure” (c) having “adequate elaboration,” and (d) having “grammar that doesn’t impede comprehension.”

Additionally, all three professors held students accountable for meeting the criteria of set out in their rubric. In each class the respective rubric served as the basis of the professor’s assessments of students writing. In all three courses, the instructors returned students’ submissions with a letter grade, detailed feedback on the essay, and a copy of the rubric indicating where the student scored on the rubric, and thus the extent to which they met the expectations for the assignment.

These assessment practices that held students accountable for the content and quality of their writing assignments were surprising to students as they were expecting to earn a passing grade for the simply submitting the work. Accordingly, their professors’ expectations of students to meet the criteria of the rubric proved disorienting.

### **“It’s Here and It’s On Time”: Disorientation to Professors’ Expectations of Coursework**

All 23 students I interviewed approached their writing assignments by focusing only upon meeting the criteria described in the syllabus as necessary for submission (i.e. word count, MLA styling, and timeliness). All 23 students expected to pass using this approach since it had proved successful in high school. However, as their essays were submitted and then graded, all 23 students also reported at least one moment of disorientation in their course when they realized that their approach to writing their essays resulted in failure. In fact, all 23 students received their first essay back with either a failing grade (i.e. F) or without a passing grade (i.e. MP for making progress).

The students’ disorientation resulted from three interrelated experiences. First, students were not expecting their writing assignments to be assessed beyond the criteria for submission outlined in the syllabus and graded based upon the criteria detailed in the rubric, like clearly communicating ideas. This was true whether students reported writing in high school (seven students) or not (16 students). Second, after receiving failing grades students were confused about what was required of them to meet the expectations of their assignments. In fact, students were completely unfamiliar with the concept of revising and resubmitting an essay to earn a higher grade. Third, students did not know how to use the professor’s feedback. Fourth, students were unaware of how to engage in the revision process as it was facilitated by their professor’s requirements for submissions and revisions.

Ebony’s experience with the first essay assignment in Professor Kelly’s class demonstrates how students’ initially approached their writing assignments, and the subsequent disorientation that followed their failure using their approach. Ebony was one of the 17 students who reported that they had never written an essay in high school. Her first graded assignment in

Professor Kelly's class asked students to write an essay "describing an experience where [they] learned something about the world." The assignment sheet listed four submission requirements: (a) "word count 500+," (b) "MLA style formatting," (c) "show your work" (hand in drafts), and (d) "hand in a reflection letter describing how feedback from peers/lab teacher was used to make changes." Additionally, the assignment sheet included the rubric that detailed a passing essay as (a) "addressing the prompt," (b) being "coherent" and using "essay and paragraph structure," (c) having "adequate elaboration," and (d) having "grammar that doesn't impede comprehension."

Despite the four requirements for submission and the rubric, Ebony believed that she only needed to meet the first three requirements listed for submission. She explained that she wrote the first essay by "thinking about [the essay topic] and whatever was on the top of [her] head... write[ing it down], edit[ing it], and just send[ing] it in." She reported that she thought the essay would pass with no problems because at the time she was thinking: "[The essay is] in MLA format, it's over 500 words, and it's mine, and it's here, and it's on time."

Ebony was shocked when she received that first paper back with a failing grade and the instructor's requested here to revise the essay. She explained that at the time she thought "what the hell? I did everything wrong?" Ebony reported that the feedback from Professor Kelly written on the paper raised questions like "what is this [that your writing about]?" and suggested that she was "not even talking about the topic." Although she received the rubric that detailed a passing essay as being coherent (rather than raising questions like, "What's this?") and addressing the prompt (rather than being assessed as "not even talking about the topic"), Ebony was not expecting Professor Kelly to actually assess the clarity and content of her writing. Accordingly, Ebony concluded at the time that she "did not understand what [Professor Kelly] want[ed]."

Ebony's experience demonstrates the powerful disorientation that students experienced when they realized that their essays would be graded based upon criteria beyond length, adherence to MLA style guidelines, and on-time submission. For Ebony and the other 16 students who reported in their interview that they had never written an essay in high school, any assessment of their writing would be new (and thus, likely disorienting). However, the six students who reported writing essays in high school had similar experiences of disorientation. These six students initially used the same approach to writing their essays as they used in high school, and experienced a similar disorientation when their approach resulted in failure.

For the students I interviewed, their success in their course largely depended upon their ability to work through this initial disorientation and learn how to revise their writing. These revision practices were adopted through engaging in their professor's assessment practices, which were aimed at helping students meet the criteria for competent writing. However, students were also unfamiliar with the assessment practices their professors used in the course, and thus proved equally disorienting.

### **“What the Hell is Revise?”: Disorientation to Professors' Assessment Practices**

Twenty of the 23 students explicitly described their understanding of assessment as a teacher judging their work as good or bad, right or wrong, and/or correct or incorrect. Whether students' high school assignments included writing essays or were confined mainly to rote drill packets and testing, they generally expected to be taught some content and asked to demonstrate their mastery (or at least memory) of that content in an assignment. Accordingly, they expected their assignments in their developmental course to be assessed as good or bad by the professor, and then, regardless of the assessment, given a passing grade for turning in the assignment.

The students' experiences with assessments in high school, whereby all submissions were final, made it difficult for them to adjust to their professors' assessments that required several revisions of the same assignment. This difficulty hindered their ability to quickly understand and adopt a new revision-oriented approach to their coursework that the professors' assessment practices were intended to foster.

Derrelle, who reported writing essays in high school English, described how he felt early in the semester when his graded essays were returned with the requirement to revise and resubmit. I asked Derrelle what his biggest difficulty was in the course. He detailed his difficulty letting go the idea that the "[the first draft] had to be good." He explained:

I feel like it [the first draft] has to be good the first time because in high school the paper, it was either good or the paper was bad. And we were always had that mindset like it had to be good or it was just bad. We didn't revise over it. We didn't have to write it over again and then get the permanent grade for that... So when [Professor Kelly] gave it back to me and said "revise it," I was like, "What the hell is revise?" Yeah, I was like "what the hell is revise?!" I said "where's my grade?!"

Derrelle's experience with the assessment of his writing in high school was that it was either good or bad, and that judgment was final. Even though Professor Kelly told Derrelle in class discussion, in the syllabus, and on his essays that he could revise and resubmit essays after an initial assessment, he reported that his central difficulty was feeling like it was unacceptable for him to write something that could be judged as bad.

According to Derrelle, Professor Kelly's assessments meant that he could no longer just write "blah, blah, blah on [his] paper" and turn it in as he did in high school. In fact, he estimated that an A high school paper would barely meet Professor Kelly's expectations for a C. Derrelle

recalled that in high school English he wrote essay after essay and that he would just write it quickly (or, “kill it right off the bat”) after looking over the assignment. The result of this approach to coursework in North City High was a grade of A. However, this same approach in developmental composition/reading at USCC resulted in Professor Kelly returning the essay without a passing grade and a requirement to revise and resubmit. Expecting his essay submissions to be given an A, Derrelle was disoriented, which led him to ask, “What the hell is revise?!” “Where’s my grade?!”

Until this class Derrelle had never heard of revising. Accordingly, his central difficulty in both initially meeting the expectations outlined in the rubric and subsequently knowing how to revise his essays stemmed from the fact that he never experienced an assessment whereby he would submit an essay, have a variety of strengths and weaknesses detailed in the form of written and verbal feedback, and then was expected to use that feedback to develop his ideas and improve the clarity for his reader. In short, Derrelle never learned how a teacher might collect an assignment, provide feedback and a grade, and then give it back to students to revise using that feedback to earn a higher grade. Derrelle was completely unaware that assignments could be used by a teacher to help him develop his ability to write an essay in ways that met with his teacher’s expectations—like those of competent academic writing outlined by Professor Kelly’s rubric.

Derrelle’s initial confusion with the assessment process that Professor Kelly practiced indicated that he was also unaware of how he might develop an essay that met with the criteria of competent academic writing in the first place. That is, if competent academic writing in Professor Kelly’s class required Derrelle to (a) address the writing prompt, (b) ensure coherence, (c) develop his ideas, and (d) eliminate grammatical errors, then, arguably, he would have been

unlikely to have met these criteria without first learning and adopting a writing process focused on drafting and revising. Generally, coherent writing with developed ideas, and no grammatical errors requires revision. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that few students could write down whatever was on top of their head and submit it and meet the four elements required for a passing essay in Professor Kelly's class.

For both Ebony and Derrelle, high school expectations for submitting work shaped an approach to coursework focused upon quickly completing assignments; filling out packets of rote drills, creating poster boards, essaying thoughts, and so forth. Accordingly, they expected the same approach to result in passing grades in developmental reading/composition under the *quid pro quo* arrangement that emerged in their urban high school. However, this approach resulted in failure because Professor Kelly held high expectations for understanding the writing of others and clearly communicating their own ideas through well-defined standards for academic writing. The disorientation that resulted from both the expectations and assessments prompted both students to adopt new approaches to their coursework focused on the "six-step" writing process that Professor Kelly taught in class.

Like all 19 students in the sample who successfully passed their developmental course, Ebony and Derrelle's initial disorientation and subsequent adoption of new approaches to coursework were fundamentally facilitated by their professor's approach to assessment. More specifically, their professor allowed them to use their initial approach and fail, provided feedback that indicated what they had to do to meet expectations, and then provided an opportunity for them practice revising. The next section details how their professor's assessments provided opportunities for them to use their high school approach to no avail, receive explicit directions to

develop a new approach, and opportunities to achieve success incorporating these new approaches into their future coursework.

**“I’m Following the Process”: The Process Students Went through to Adopt a New Approach to Their Coursework**

All 23 students indicated that their disorientation to their professor’s expectations and assessment practices prompted them to try at least one strategy to improve their grades.

Generally, students sought help in meeting their professor’s expectations either by approaching the professor and/or seeking help from the Learning Lab at USCC.

After failing her first essay assignment Ebony developed a strategy for finding out how to meet Professor Kelly’s expectations for writing assignments by asking the professor (and a Learning Lab tutor) to review a draft of each of the next five essays a week before they were due. Ebony’s intent was to get Professor Kelly “to say what’s on her mind” about the essay so that Ebony could use the feedback to revise. Ebony described these meetings with Professor Kelly as “helpful” because she would tell her things like “get what you want to tell the reader down first” and then “fill in the body.” Ebony would then revise her essays using the instructions for how to revise, as well as clarifying those points Professor Kelly found confusing.

By the end of the semester, Ebony was earning As on her essays without approaching Professor Kelly outside of class. Ebony’s success in meeting Professors Kelly’s expectations for passing essays was a matter of developing a new approach to coursework comprised of two interrelated features. First, Ebony reported that she realized that her grade would be based upon clarity and content (as outlined on the grading rubric), and therefore she needed to move away from writing whatever was on the top of her head to developing a structured, “five-paragraph” essay. Whereas Ebony recalled thinking “I don’t care about the body, the head, the introduction,



[and] conclusion,” at the beginning of the semester, by the end the semester, she was focused on “writing the body of it and then the introduction and the conclusion... because they kind of have to go off of each other.”

Second, and just as important, Ebony adopted a process approach to her writing assignments. At the end of the semester she explained that much of her difficulty in writing an essay early in the course was that she “didn’t understand the writing process.” Ebony was referring to Professor Kelly’s six-step writing process—analyzing a writing assignment, free-writing ideas, drafting an essay, structuring a five paragraph essay, revising for coherence, and revising for grammar—which was explicitly and systematically taught for all five writing assignments and practiced in class. According to Ebony, a process approach to her coursework “was all new.” Ebony reported that by the end of the semester, she was better able to meet Professor Kelly’s criteria for competent writing because she replaced the approach she used in high school—write what was on the top of her head, edit, and submit—with, “put in more work into [writing essays]... following the [six-step writing] process.”

The process of engaging Professor Kelly to find out “what’s on her mind” helped lead Ebony to a new approach to her coursework focused on developing her clarity using the five-paragraph structure and a revision process for writing. Ebony’s new approach to coursework resulted in As on her papers and her ability to meet with the criteria of competent writing outlined in the rubric without asking Professor Kelly to read her essays before each submission. Ebony explained in her interview:

In the beginning I used to always say [to Professor Kelly], “help me, help me, help me,” but now I don’t ask her for help. I just know what to do, and if I do need help on

something, I just go [ask Professor Kelly]... and then I'll go incorporate [her feedback] in my project.

By the end of the semester, Ebony confidently reported, "I know what to do." She knew that her essays needed a structure, which included an introduction, body, and conclusion, that these elements had to be coherent (or "go off of each other"), and that writing an essay that will be assessed for content and clarity required "more work" using a revision process.

Despite Ebony's seemingly positive response to her disorientation (quickly developing strategies meet the criteria of college-level writing), she struggled to shed years of understanding success in assignments as simply meeting the criterion of turning it in. Ebony explained her struggle throughout the semester that followed the disorientation as she tried to let go of her old approach to coursework and adopt a new one.

Ebony: I'm following the [six-step writing] process, even though I don't trust it like that. I think I've grown a better appreciation for it.

Stefan: So you had this idea about how you should just write what you're thinking and submit it, and then you get into this class and then what happened?

Ebony: [Professor Kelly] shoot [my approach to writing essays] down with a shotgun. She did! She shoot it down with a shotgun and then it's [my approach to writing essays] just lying there dead. Then I'm wondering, "do I get a funeral for it or do I revive it?"

Stefan: Is the jury still out?

Ebony: Yeah. I revived [my approach to writing essays] and then I tried to build on it. I tried to make it stronger, tried to make it have the characteristics it's supposed to have and enhance it. That's where I'm stuck at now.

Stefan: [Professor Kelly] had to shoot down your idea that you should just write down whatever was on the top of your head and then you were looking for another way?

Ebony: Yeah, I was looking for another way to do it [write my essays], or how can I do it [write my essays] in my own way that's similar to the [six-step] writing process.

Stefan: Just not do it [write your essays] exactly the way [Professor Kelly] suggested?

Ebony: Not exactly the way she suggested because I'm my own person, so I can't just do what you want me to do because your way might now benefit me. So I gotta to make it into something of my own.

Ebony's interview response reveals slight contempt for the new approach she adopted to pass the class; she is not able to bring herself to do it "exactly" the way Professor Kelly suggested because Ebony is her own person that has been successful for years with her initial approach, and just because the new approach "might now benefit" her, does not mean that she can simply abandon the approach that has led to her academic success until this point in her life. For Ebony, adopting a new approach to her coursework meant that she had to reconcile her understanding of success in coursework as a matter of writing down whatever she was thinking and turning it in, with the six-step process approach required for success in Professor Kelly's class. This reconciliation represents the death of her old approach. In fact, she likened the experience to having her initial approach shot dead and subsequently she was faced with the dilemma of mourning its loss or attempting to save its life. Despite Ebony's success with her new approach to coursework, at the end of the semester she reported still feeling "stuck" trying

to “revive” her initial approach to writing essays, by “make[ing] it [her initial approach] have the characteristics it’s supposed to have” so that she can “make it [the new approach] into something of [her] own.”

Other students were less inclined to meet their professor outside of class and instead relied on tutors at the Learning Lab to figure out how to earn passing grades. Bernice recalled that, early in the semester that after failing the first two essays and reading Professor Rose’s feedback, she “had no idea what [Professor Rose was] talking about [in her written comments on the essay], and did not know what to do [to use those comments to revise].” In our interview, she explained that failing these essays was an entirely new experience for her: “I was a good student [in high school], I was like a C student, but I always did my work, I wasn’t like in trouble a lot, and stuff. I always made sure I did my work.” Bernice believed that doing her work (completing and turning in assignments) made her a good student because it resulted in passing grades (i.e. Cs). Yet, it seems that passing assessments in high school required Bernice to meet only the criteria of *submitted*. According to Bernice, to pass essay assignments in high school she “just wrote it up and handed it in.” After early failures in Professor Rose’s class using that approach, Bernice realized that passing assessments in her developmental reading/composition course required her to meet criteria beyond *submitted*.

In an attempt to learn what these additional criteria were and how to meet them, Bernice sought help at USCC’s Learning Lab where she learned for the “first time” that people reread what they write and change it to make sure that it clearly communicates their ideas to a reader. She explained that, working with a tutor, she learned to read her drafts slowly to herself, making corrections as she thought necessary. For Bernice, this was the first time she ever heard of

proofreading or revising. She explained: “I never like really proofread myself before, like in high school... I never really proofread any of my writing.”

Once Bernice began to proofread and revise her essays, she reported that by the end of the semester her “grammar [was] okay” and she can now “see where [she] is repeating herself” and can “take some [words] out” when her sentences are too long. Revising her essays in this way helped Bernice pass Professor Rose’s class with a C grade. If it were not for Bernice’s efforts to figure out how to pass essay assignments by going to the Learning Lab, and the Learning Lab tutor demonstrating a revision process, Bernice might have still been struggling at the end of the semester to understand how to incorporate Professor Rose’s feedback into her essay.

Ultimately, Professor Rose’s requirement to revise and resubmit written assignments helped Bernice learn how to draft and revise essays that met with Professor Rose’s expectations for college-level writing. This was similar to other students’ experiences. As students began to adopt a revision process they were more able to independently demonstrate competency in college-level writing. The next section details how one student’s experiences with assessments over two developmental courses shaped a new understanding of her professors’ assessment practices, new approach to coursework, and a high level of college-level writing competency.

### **“The More Mistakes You Have the Better You Could Improve”: Achieving College-Level Writing Competency Through Revision**

For all 19 of the students I interviewed who passed their developmental course, the process of their professors collecting writing assignments, providing feedback and a grade, and requiring a student to revise and resubmit were central to shaping new approaches to their coursework. In fact, to the extent that students experienced assessments as opportunities to

practice reading and writing in ways that met with their professor's criteria for passing, they began to incorporate new approaches to their coursework that mirrored their professor's assessment practices, and anticipated and satisfied their professor's expectations.

Sofia's experiences with assessment in composition/developmental reading the semester before I met her, and in Professor Smith's composition/developmental reading class, helped her develop the ability to independently (and with growing proficiency) meet Professor Smith's expectations of college-level writing. The development of her abilities in this regard was based upon experiencing assessments as an aid to her learning, as well as demonstrations of how she might better develop essays on her own.

In high school, Sofia's interest in achieving "good" grades led to frustration when her teachers passed her with what she reported as "low Bs," yet assessed certain parts of her work as "bad," and never provided opportunities for her to revise according to their feedback. In our interview I asked if she learned how to structure an essay in high school English:

Yeah, we did. But we mainly did book reports and, "Here's a topic. Write a two-page essay about it." Whenever we got it back, it would just talk about grammar and stuff, or like add a topic here. When I asked [my teachers how to improve my writing], they'd be like, "Yeah, you just needed another topic." I was like "I ran out of topics, that's why it's that short."

Sofia described how in high school she felt like she had to defend her work verbally because she was neither instructed on how to improve upon the skill(s) (i.e. grammar and generating topics) her teachers assessed as weak, nor given the opportunity to revise so that she could practice those skills for future use. Having met with success in both of her developmental courses at USCC, Sofia discussed her experience with assessments retrospectively and was

therefore able to identify that teacher feedback “just talking about grammar” or suggesting that she “add a topic” without a chance to revise left her believing that she was a “bad writer.”

Since Sofia was not given the opportunity to revise her work in high school, she came to understand assessments of writing as indelible judgments about her ability. She explained:

I know with certain high schools, when you look over the persons shoulder and you see [their graded essay, students say] “oh, they got a bad grade,” or whatever and then the person, they’re kind of down on themselves too because now everyone sees they have a bad grade because of all the red marks they have [on their graded essay].... In high school, we used to always be like, “look at all the mistakes you made. You’re not a good writer”....

Sofia was one of the students in her high school who understood herself as having “never been a good writer” because all of the “red marks” she received on her graded essays. In fact, Sofia explained that although her teachers gave her “low Bs” she knew “they weren’t strong essays... they weren’t passable for college level.” However, in her developmental composition/reading course the semester before Professor Smith’s class, she experienced a fundamental reorientation to assessments. Here is the same interview response without elision:

I know with certain high schools, when you look over the person shoulder and you see [their graded essay, students say] “oh, they got a bad grade,” or whatever and then the person, they’re kind of down on themselves too because now everyone sees they have a bad grade because of all the red marks they have [on their graded essay]. But I feel like once you get a good teacher that tells you the more edits you have on there it’s better because you can improve your writing, which I got that from [my developmental composition/reading professor]. In high school, we used to always be like, “look at all the

mistakes you made. You're not a good writer." Here, [at USCC, my developmental composition/reading professor] showed us the more mistakes you have the better you could improve. That's how I always see it [now].

Sofia's new understanding of assessments was developed in her developmental composition/reading course through an assessment process focused on drafting and revising where she was expected to incorporate what she described as "feedback from everyone." Although, she recalled that she and her classmates initially "didn't like... getting criticized in front of the whole class," Sofia came to understand assessments as providing feedback that highlighted areas in her essays that she needed to improve *and* opportunities to practice those improvements without penalty.

Importantly, Sofia's experience in her previous developmental course helped her understand that assessments help her to improve her ability to write academic essays. Central to her reorientation was developing an approach to coursework that began with drafting an essay and then revising until it made a clear argument to the reader. Accordingly, when she reached composition/developmental reading, she eagerly engaged in Professor Smith's assessment practices, which included a first draft peer review, a formal assessment, and the opportunity to revise all five assigned essays for a second formal assessment. I asked Sofia how her change in mindset that occurred in developmental composition/reading shaped her approach to her coursework in composition/developmental reading with Professor Smith:

I used to think like if you have so much feedback on your paper then it's a bad paper, it's not good. But, now I see it as I do have like a good start, I just need to use what [Professor Smith] said and make it better. ...Because I remember [my developmental composition/reading professor] said, "there's never a perfect paper." So I felt like that



[getting feedback from Professor Smith] was the next step into a perfect paper where sometimes I want another revision so I could do it again with the extra edits that [Professor Smith] puts in there.

As Sofia experienced assessments as a process of considering feedback, revising, and resubmitting a superior essay for a superior grade, she developed her understanding of writing as a process of revision. In this way, Sofia develop her independence as a writer, too; by the end of the semester she was able to anticipate and satisfy Professor Smith's criteria for academic writing in Composition earning a grade of B+ on the first formal draft of her third essay. (Sofia elected to revise all of her essays, despite relatively high initial grades on her last three.) I asked Sofia how she became a better writer:

I kind of just had to take my time doing it. I used to rush through it just to get it over with because I didn't like writing essays. Now, to make myself better I just focus on it and take my time and now it comes out good when I follow all the steps and think of [Professor Smith's] comments from my previous paper, I think about it on this one and make sure all my ideas are together and they're not everywhere, basically. They're all organized.

To the extent that Sofia has learned through the assessment practices of her last two developmental English professors to focus, take her time, follow all the steps (of a writing process), and understands that all her ideas should be together and organized, she has developed a high level of competency in academic writing. Her competency resulted from assessments in developmental English that avoided judging her ability to write, and instead asked her to practice revision steps that generally improve writing. Through these assessment experiences, Sofia

adopted these steps as matter of practice in her coursework, and by the end of the semester required little help to meet Professor Smith's standards for academic writing.

Since Sofia's experience with assessments in high school never demonstrated steps, and always resulted in "low Bs" with "red marks" regardless of her interest in earning a higher grade, she concluded that she was a "bad writer" who did not understand English. In fact, she reported that in high school she "just hated [English] so much." However, now that Sofia has been assessed in ways that have taught her how to improve her writing using a revision process to meet the expectations of her professors, she has changed her mind; she reported in this interview: "Now that I understand [English], I like it."

Five of the 23 students I interviewed did not experience a reorientation to their professor's assessments of their written assignments, and thus they did not develop the ability to revise their essays in ways that would meet with their professor's expectations. These students continued to approach their reading and writing assignments as they did in high school, expecting the same result, passed for their effort. However, because they were not able to meet the criteria for academic writing that their professor maintained for them, they failed their respective courses. The next section details the difficulties one such student.

#### **"That Makes No Sense to Me": One Student's Difficulties Adopting New Approaches to Coursework**

Michael's learning experience in composition/developmental reading was similar to the other four students in my sample who reported not being able to meet their professor's expectations for writing assignments. All five students attended most (if not all) class sessions, submitted all of their assignments, and sought help from their professor and/or a Learning Lab

tutor in an effort to pass the class. However, at the end of the semester they were no closer to adopting approaches to writing that would help them pass their course.

Here, I detail Michael's experience as a representative narrative that illustrates how students' previous learning experiences shape understandings that can make it difficult for them to interpret their professor's expectations, and thus almost impossible to understand what they need to do to pass their course. Moreover, Michael's case demonstrates how aspects of pedagogy that helped 17 students in my sample develop college-level writing skills can fail to help some students see that they need to adopt a different approach to their coursework.

### **Failing with the Old Approach**

All 23 students reported that at some point during their developmental course they realized that approaching their reading and writing assignments as they did in high school resulted in failure. For Michael, the realization that high school did not prepare him to meet the expectations of Professor Smith's composition/developmental reading course left him disoriented and frustrated. He explained in our interview: "High school's weird [because] they just taught us little stuff, which I thought it was gonna help me in college... [but] it did not help whatsoever." However, unlike the students who were able to successfully pass their course, Michael was mostly unable to move from feeling disoriented and frustrated toward adopting alternative approaches to his coursework that would have helped him pass his developmental course.

My observations of Michael throughout the semester indicated that he was capable, worked hard, and earnestly wanted to pass the class. In fact, he attended every class session, occasionally participated in classroom discussions, turned in all his assignments, and consistently demonstrated at least a cursory understanding of the assigned readings. In the first interview with

Professor Smith, he agreed: “I feel like [Michael] has a chance. I feel like he is actually putting in more effort than [some other students].” However, by the end of the semester, Michael reported in his interview that he had “no chance of passing.”

Among Michael’s difficulties was continuing to approach his coursework in ways that resulted in passing grades in high school (and developmental composition/reading the semester prior), but that resulted in failure in Professor Smith’s course. Whereas Professor Smith provided students with an “English 101 Writing Checklist Criteria” (i.e. rubric) that outlined his expectations for: (a) a “thesis statement that answers the question,” (b) “complex synthesis” of the students own ideas and the ideas of others, and (c) “expression of [these] ideas clearly” using the “organization” and “language” of academic writing, Michael reported that he would just “write really big general answers to the questions.” He described his approach to writing essays for Professor Smith:

Michael: I just answer [the essay prompt with] one big sentence and then the rest is just bullshit.

Stefan: And do you know it’s bullshit?

Michael: Yeah, I know it’s bullshit as I’m writing it.

Stefan: As your writing it?

Michael: Yeah, as I’m writing it I’m like “this is bullllllshittttt, this is gonna make no sense.” But, just to fill in the words, just to be able to hand it in, get some type of [passing] grade on it.

Michael explained in this interview that he “fill[ed] in the words” by documenting what he referred to as his “own opinions.” He described his approach as “working [his] ass off on these essays” because he was “spend[ing] like a whole day just trying to figure out how to set it

up and then like three days of writing it.” This approach to coursework, whereby he would write what he knew to be “bullshit” that made no sense just to “fill in words” over the course of three days in order to have something to “hand in,” resulted in “passing grades” (Ds) in high school, and in developmental composition/reading (Cs) the semester prior. However, in Professor Smith’s class this approach did not result in “some type of [passing] grade” as it did in Michael’s previous assessment experiences, rather it resulted in failure because Michael’s essays were assessed based upon the criteria detailed in the rubric.

### **Adding on Sentences**

Michael had opportunities throughout the semester to revise his failing essays to meet the requirements for passing according to the Writing Checklist Criteria. In fact, all five writing assignments required students to bring a draft of their essay to class for peer review a week before the assignment was due, submit a first formal draft to Professor Smith the following week, which was assessed and returned with written feedback detailing the strengths and weaknesses according to the Writing Checklist Criteria, and then, after the first formal draft was returned, students had one week to revise their essays according to the feedback and resubmit for a final grade.

For each essay assignment, Michael brought a draft for peer review and submitted the first formal draft on time. For all five essay assignments, he received his first submission back with a failing grade and feedback detailing the ways in which his essay would have to be revised in order to meet the standards outlined in the Writing Checklist Criteria. In our interview Michael reported that he “understood the essay questions,” but concluded from the feedback that his problem was that he “answered [the essay questions] too generally,” not providing enough detail to support the points he made. I asked Michael what feedback he received on his essays:

[Professor Smith's comments were] like 'what does this mean'? 'How does this connect to the story'? And then I also have a little misspellings in there and he'll add them in there, but it's mostly just the same thing: 'How does this connect to the story'?

Michael interpreted feedback that repeatedly asked how his thoughts connected to the story he was writing about as indicating that he was answering the questions too generally. Since Michael had never been expected to meet any standards of academic writing beyond "fill[ing] in words," he was unaccustomed to making connections between his thinking and the thinking of others. While his interpretation of the feedback that he was answering the essay questions to generally was, in part, accurate, he seemed to have missed the larger point that, according to the Writing Checklist Criteria, he needed to develop an "analysis and synthesis of assigned readings" and make "connections between [his] own ideas... and those of others."

Michael continued to misinterpret Professor Smith's feedback after meeting with him during office hours. After failing the final revision of the first paper, Michael's intention to pass the class led him to attend office hours to find out how to earn a passing grade on papers two and three. Michael reported that he went to see Professor Smith to ask: "What does he [Professor Smith] want me write"? Michael believed that Professor Smith would tell him what he needed to write in order to meet the requirements for a passing essay. Michael described the "concrete suggestions" Professor Smith gave him during office hours to address the concerns highlighted in the feedback:

Michael: I went in [Professor Smith's] office and asked him- "all right, what can I add on to this to make it better?" Like [I would ask him] "what do you mean [by your comment(s)]?" On his revisions, he gives little comments, [I asked] "well, what do you mean by this?" And he'll tell me and then I'll

add it [what he said] on my revision and then I end up still getting the same grade I already had...

Stefan: And you added how many sentences?

Michael: Maybe like an extra three sentences, maybe four [to the whole essay].

Michael attended office hours to find out what sentences he could add on to make the essay passing. However, it was unlikely that Professor Smith told Michael what to add on since Professor Smith told me in our first interview that he avoids telling students what to write as a matter of pedagogy. According to Professor Smith, he avoids telling students what to write because, in his experience, doing so “does not improve students’ writing.” What Professor Smith told me he does do is “try to start with what [the students] have written and talk about what they're doing and how that's different from the essay assignment... [so the students] see that they're going to have to rewrite it.” Although it was unlikely that Professor Smith told Michael what to write, Michael still interpreted Professor Smith’s discussion of his feedback as telling Michael what sentences to “add on... to make it better.”

For example, Michael reported that Professor Smith told him that some part of his second essay was “really strong” and suggested that “maybe [Michael could] add onto it and make it stronger.” However, Michael’s understanding of revision was to add on sentences that his teachers told him to add. Accordingly, he interpreted Professor Smith’s feedback, which was aimed at helping Michael see that he needed to *rewrite* the essay around his “really strong” ideas, as telling Michael that what he wrote was correct, it just needed an additional sentence or two. Michael explained in the interview how he interpreted Professor Smith’s encouragement:

[Professor Smith] is telling me it's already good. I think if I add on to [what I have written]... it was gonna make no sense so I'll bring that whole paragraph down a grade

level. So I'll add on maybe a sentence or two so I don't completely destroy the whole paragraph, and I guess it's still not good enough.

Michael interpreted Professor Smith's encouragement of his ideas as indicating that, at least parts, of his essay are "already good"; and, having no experience using a drafting and revising process that is focused on *rewriting*, Michael feared completely destroying those sections he understood to be passing. Accordingly, for Michael, revision simply meant add "a sentence or two" that he thinks Professor Smith told him to add. These revision efforts resulted in the same failing grade because Michael did not address the main problem of connecting his ideas to those of others, and, further, he did not incorporate the sentences he added in a way that would "express [his] ideas clearly" as was required by the Writing Checklist Criteria. That is, he did not rewrite the essay. In fact, in the same way that Michael knew his first drafts were "bullshit," he knew that his revised essays made no sense. Michael explained his revision process as he added on the sentences that he believed Professor Smith wanted him to add:

And then once I try to add [sentences] on to it [the essay], it seems like I'm making it [the essay] worse and once I see that, I just stop. 'Well, this is the best I can do. This is the best you're gonna get from me' so I'll just leave it at that. ...As I'm writing, I'm like 'all right, why do I have the feeling that I'm making this paragraph worse'? I'll leave it there for him to judge, but in my head I'm like 'that makes no sense to me.' And then I guess I was right because when I get the grade back, I get the same reaction, [Professor Smith's comments are] like 'how does this go along with that, how does this go along with what [the author] said'?

Michael reported trying to add on sentences, not as part of a larger revision, but as additions to what he believed Professor Smith was telling him were passing (i.e. "good")



paragraphs. Accordingly, his revisions made no sense, even to him. Further, without knowledge of, or experience with, alternative approaches to revising essays, he reverted to just turning in the essay for Professor Smith to judge, hoping for a passing grade. However, unlike his previous teachers, Professor Smith did not pass Michael for submitting (or in this case, resubmitting) assignments; rather, Professor Smith expected Michael to connect his ideas to those of the assigned authors as outlined in the assignment sheet and Writing Checklist Criteria. Accordingly, Michael received the same failing grades and feedback on his revisions as he did on his first formal drafts.

Michael attended all the classes, submitted all five essays and submitted revised versions of all five essays. However, after the third essay was returned in and received the same failing grade as the first two, he did not bother go to office hours anymore since he knew Professor Smith was “just going to say the same thing.”

For Michael, his frustration resulted from not being able to meet the expectations for a passing essay despite his efforts. His difficulty stemmed from his expectations that Professor Smith would tell him what to write and then he would comply for a passing grade. However, Professor Smith avoided telling Michael what to write and instead provided feedback aimed at helping him to see that he needed to rewrite his essays. Without being explicit about his intent and what Michael actually had to do, Michael continued to interpret the feedback as indicating what sentences to add.

### **Quid pro Quo in Developmental English**

Michael's expectations of Professor Smith's assessment practices were shaped by previous experiences in high school, as well as developmental English at USCC. In the interview, I asked Michael if he ever had an experience in which adding sentences on to his

essays after they were initially graded was successful or made the essay good. He replied: “Sometimes – that was only in high school.” However, the interview data reveal that essaying his thoughts and giving them to his developmental composition/reading the prior semester generally resulted in a passing grade. Michael’s success in that course was achieved by asking the professor what she wanted him to write, receiving an answer, and writing it before submitting an assignment. Michael explained:

In my [developmental composition/reading] class, after [the professor] explained to me what she wanted, I was getting low Ds, which is fine for me. If I can get a D, I’m happy.... Yeah, cause she helped me a lot... a couple days, a couple weeks in a row, I came in early when an essay was due and she’d look at it and then real quick tell me what I did wrong and then I’d revise it real quick before the class started so I could hand it in technically on time.

Michael’s developmental composition/reading professor entered into the basic *quid pro quo* arrangement whereby if Michael performed certain tasks, he would be passed with a grade of D. Michael seemed unaware that a D is not a passing grade in a college-level course. Moreover, Michael passed his developmental composition/reading course the prior semester without learning how to use a process of drafting and revising to write college-level essays. Michael’s experience in the previous semester was simply an extension of his high school experience; he passed by showing up with an essay to submit before class, asked the professor to “real quick” tell him what he did wrong, and then “revise it real quick” to fix those errors before submission in exchange for a passing grade.

Michael was passed through high school by simply adding the sentences that his teachers told him to and through his first developmental English course by quickly fixing what a

professor told him he did wrong minutes before an essay was due. In the same way that Michael's high school experience left him unprepared to develop an academic essay using a drafting and revising approach that would meet with Professor Smith's Writing Checklist Criteria, his developmental composition/reading course left him equally unprepared. That is, since neither his high school experiences nor his developmental composition/reading course required Michael to understand revising as a process of addressing feedback by rewriting (or "destroying," to use Michael's word) in ways that produce a fundamentally different essay, he was unable to use such a process for his coursework. As importantly, these previous experiences made it difficult for Michael to interpret Professor Smith's feedback as detailing how his essays had to be rewritten. Instead, Michael continued to believe that he was being told what sentences to add on.

### **No Closer to a Reorientation**

By the end of the semester, and after five essays (with three revisions each), Michael concluded that his failure was a result of not meeting with Professor Smith's personal preferences:

It also goes with the teacher, like how they want us to write our essays. I add a lot of my opinion where in [Professor Smith's] class he doesn't like [me] doing that... it's like how I talk, I always add my opinion in it and I don't know, I just always do that and that's what brings my grade down...I know he doesn't want us to add any of our opinions in there, which I add in a lot and I think that's one of my main problems.

Since Michael's approach to writing essays was to "fill in the words" with his own "opinions," and Professor Smith was the first teacher to consistently fail him for this approach, Michael concluded that his main problem was this particular teacher's [Professor Smith's]

dislike of Michael adding his opinions. However, because Michael had never been expected to connect his ideas with those of others in his writing, Michael confused writing his opinions with what Professor Smith liked. In fact, all five essay assignments required Michael to argue his opinion (position) about his ideas in connection with ideas in the assigned readings. In fact, under the Purpose section of the extensive one-page assignment sheets that Professor Smith handed out for each essay assignment, it explicitly stated his expectations: “You are entering a ‘conversation’ . . . , which means you will need to include what other people have written on the topic, as well as what you think.” Still, to some extent, Michael was right, Professor Smith did not want Michael to “add his opinions in there,” without connecting them to the ideas of others. Professor Smith noted in the first interview that Michael’s essays were “very detailed, personal reaction[s] to the reading . . . ,” and concluded that Michael “has a misunderstanding about what academic writing is.” Nonetheless, Michael never interpreted his failing grades as indication that he needed to adopt a new approach to his coursework; rather, he maintained that he needed to figure out exactly what a professor wanted him to write:

And now I know it's gonna be different for every professor, but I think now it's just what the professor wants, I don't understand exactly what they want so –[the result] is just gonna turn out to a confused student with a bad essay.

From Michael’s perspective, he failed Composition/developmental reading because he could not “understand exactly” what Professor Smith wanted him to write. His confusion and bad essays resulted from not being able to figure his end of the *quid pro quo* bargain that was easily discernable with all of his previous teachers (including the developmental English course the prior semester). Michael’s belief that his failure resulted from not figuring out what Professor Smith wanted him to write prevented him from seeing his more fundamental difficulty, namely

that he does not know how to revise in ways that would enable him to meet the Writing Checklist Criteria. Moreover, since Michael did not see the need for a new approach, he was never able to learn the process of drafting and revising that Professor Smith's assessment practices were intended to foster.

At the end of the semester, Michael was no closer to developing a new approach to his coursework. I asked him in the interview what he believed he would have needed to pass the class:

...if me and him [Professor Smith] just sat down for a full hour and I would actually type my revision in front of him, as I'm doing what he doesn't want me do, he'd tell me, and tell me about it, why I'm doing, how I could stop it, and how I could stop doing it within all my essays. As I'm typing, he'd be like "just switch that around."

Michael believed that he could have passed the course if Professor Smith explained exactly what he did not like and how Michael could stop doing it. Michael assumed that difference between the essays he was writing and those that would earn passing grades was specific corrections such as "just switch that around." However, Professor Smith's pedagogical intent was to highlight the differences between what Michael wrote and what the assignment required in order to help Michael see that he needed to rewrite his essay. While Professor Smith's assessment practices were indicative of the assessment practices that helped facilitate the adoption of a new approach to coursework for the 18 students who passed the composition portion of their course, it did not shape a new approach for Michael. Rather, Michael continued to use the approach shaped by his previous *quid pro quo* assessment arrangements. He left the course still writing what he knows to be, to use his words, "bullshit" that "makes no sense,"

wanting and expecting the professor to tell him exactly what he needs to “revise” “real quick” in exchange for a passing grade.

In sum, Michael’s failure was the combination of him expecting to be told what to write and Professor Smith not explicitly telling Michael that he had to rewrite his essays. All of Michael’s experiences with assessments until this course were a matter of making an effort and then submitting the assignment for a passing grade or having the teacher tell him what to change before submitting to earn a passing grade. However, Professor Smith did not do this. His pedagogical aim was to “start with what [the students] have written” and then provide feedback on “how that’s different from the essay assignment” assuming that the students will “see that they’re going to have to rewrite it.” However, for students like Michael who have no understanding of revision as it is practiced in college, they neither see that they have to rewrite it, nor know how to do so.

### **Summary**

All 23 students I interviewed described how easy their high school assignments were to complete. In fact, 17 of the 23 students reported never having to write a single essay, they only completed work packets of rote drills and took tests. Despite the ease with which their assignments could be completed, 19 students explained how in their high schools many students did not work at all. To compel students to do work, their teachers would promise passing grades in exchange for submitting a certain amount of assignments by a certain time. However, this bargain precluded teachers from assessing the content of the work, and thus turning in assignments became the single criterion upon which academic success was achieved. Accordingly, the students I interviewed developed approaches to coursework focused upon meeting only the criteria required for submission (i.e. word count, MLA format, etc.).

Because students were unaccustomed to having the content of their work assessed, they experienced disorientation when their work was returned without a grade, and with the direction to revise and resubmit. These assessment practices also proved disorienting, as the students had never been introduced to the practice of revision. Subsequently, the 18 students who ultimately passed the composition portion of their course worked through their disorientations by identifying and developing new strategies to meet with their professor's expectations for academic writing. Importantly, the students' new strategies were derived from the assessment practices. That is, while the requirements to revise and resubmit proved disorienting, it was also the approach students adopted to use for future assignments. In fact, as students began to adopt the process of first drafting and then revising as demonstrated by their professor's assessment practices, students were increasingly able to independently meet the criteria required for competent academic writing in their course.

Five students in my sample reported failing the composition portion of their developmental English course. These students were not able to develop new approaches to their writing assignments that would have helped them meet the criteria required for competent academic writing. Michael's failure in composition/developmental reading demonstrated the difficulties that these students experienced. They generally misunderstood their professor's feedback on their essays as corrections they were required to make according to the *quid pro quo* pact they had with their previous teachers. They never identified the need to develop new approaches to their coursework, and therefore never adopted the drafting and revising process their professor's assessment practices were intended to develop.

The next chapter concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the theoretical, practical, and research implications of these findings.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMENDATIONS

I examined how students came to meet with success or failure in three sections of developmental English at one urban-serving community college. My goal was to help illuminate why most students who enroll in developmental education never make it to a college-level course. The findings presented in Chapter IV suggest that for the sample of 23 students I interviewed, their approaches to coursework shaped much of their success or failure. In this chapter I discuss the theoretical, practical, and research implications of these findings. To this end, I first summarize the problem and research methods. Second, I discuss the findings in the context of the relevant literature. Third, I discuss the implications for practice and make recommendations for both pedagogy and policy. Fourth, I conclude with a discussion about the implications for future research.

#### **Summary of the Problem and Methods**

Community colleges enroll almost half of all public higher education students (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012), and Attewell et al. (2006) estimated that more than half (58%) of these students enroll in at least one developmental education course. For students who pass their developmental education course(s) and enroll in a college-level course, developmental education helps them to achieve the same or better short-term (i.e. fall-to-fall persistence) and long-term (i.e. degree attainment/transfer) outcomes as students who are deemed prepared (Bahr, 2010a; Bahr, 2008; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). However, most students who enroll in developmental education never make it to a college-level course. Baily (2009) estimated that more than half (56%) of community college students who enroll in any developmental education course never make it to



a college-level course. These students fail out, withdraw, or pass their developmental course(s) and never return (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

The available evidence from large scale survey research suggests that developmental education is particularly unhelpful for students who are referred to multiple levels of developmental coursework, and the students in that category tend to be non-White, low SES, and have low, high school GPAs (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Bahr, 2010b; Bailey et al., 2010). However, Bailey et al. (2010) found that regardless of race/ethnicity, SES, or educational background community college students deemed underprepared were significantly more likely to complete their first college-level course if they ignored their developmental referral. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the students who ignored their math or reading placement successfully completed a college-level course, as compared to only 27% of the students who enrolled in developmental education. The only empirically observable difference between the two groups was that students who skipped their developmental referral actually enrolled in a college-level course.

The evidence suggests *enrollment* in developmental education largely accounts for the attrition. Yet, developmental education is also a key aspect in helping many students prepare for success in their college-level coursework. In fact, Bailey et al. (2010) also found that students who skipped their developmental referral passed their college-level course at lower rates than students who successfully completed their developmental education course(s). Moreover, students who skipped their referral and failed the college-level course were much less likely to earn any college-credit after three years.

The attrition among the subset of students enrolled in developmental English seems particularly problematic. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that students enrolled in

developmental math are much less likely to successfully pass their course(s) if they are underprepared for English (Bahr, 2007). While math is no less important to earning a college degree (particularly in math intensive fields), college-level English skills (namely reading and writing) are precursors to success in all disciplines, including math.

To date, large-scale survey research has not shed much light on how or why enrollment in developmental English might prove deleteriously for so many students. The decontextualized nature of the data does not capture the most central aspect of students' success or failure, namely their learning experiences in these courses. Indeed, teaching and learning in any setting takes place through a social process in pedagogical relationships between learners and teachers (Ramsden, 2003). Course content and a professor's pedagogical approach is based upon their disciplinary knowledge, understanding of teaching, expectations for student learning, and perceptions of students (e.g. Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hillocks, 1999; Hull et al., 1991; Ramsden, 2003). And, student learning is shaped by their disciplinary understandings, personal aims and intents, preconceived notions of teaching and learning, and experience as a student (e.g. Bransford et al., 1999; Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Hull et al., 1991; Ramsden, 2003). This "context of learning is ever-present," as student learning in a course the "response to the implicit or explicit requirements of their teachers" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 64).

Accordingly, learning how students meet with success or failure in a course requires understanding the content being taught, how a professor's pedagogy helps students learn that content (or not), and how students respond to their professor's pedagogy (Cohen et al., 2003). The interactions among these three aspects of the pedagogical relationship--content, professor, and students--are where most (if not all) educational outcomes manifest (Cohen et al., 2003; Grubb, 2010).

Several scholars have uncovered a few of the interactions among content, instructors, and students that shape success or failure in developmental English at both 2 and 4-year colleges (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Fox, 1990; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hull et al., 1991). These researchers suggested that poor outcomes are in part attributable to: (a) content empty pedagogy that fails to engage students in meaningful learning (Callahan, & Chumney, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013); (b) professors' misinterpretations of students' response to pedagogy, which can lead professors to inadvertently diminish students' motivation (Cox, 2009; Hull et al., 1991); (c) student's counterproductive behavior driven by their fear (Cox, 2009); and (d) the difficulty students have understanding and practicing language conventions that are unfamiliar to them (Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Fox, 1990).

Yet the extant literature largely ignores a focused look at understanding how content, professor, and students interact in the developmental English classroom at community colleges. The few studies that have included investigations these classrooms either draw conclusion upon untested assumptions about students' learning experiences (i.e. Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013) or focus mostly on students who successfully navigated developmental education, or were never deemed underprepared for college-level coursework (Cox, 2009).

To fill this gap in the literature, I sought to learn how students enrolled in developmental English at an urban serving community college experienced the content and pedagogy in their course, and how their experiences shaped success or failure. In light of the relevant literature and these objectives, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do students who are enrolled in developmental English at one urban-serving community college experience the content and pedagogy in their course?

2. How do students' respond to the content and pedagogy they experience in their course?
3. How does the pedagogy that students experience shape success or failure in the course?

To answer these questions I conducted a qualitative study to uncover how students' enrolled in three sections of developmental English at USCC experienced their developmental English course, and how these experiences shaped success or failure. Central to the design of the study was the selection of three professors who rely upon student-centered pedagogies to help students develop college-level reading and writing practices. Selecting exceptional professors allowed me to illuminate best practices as well as uncover features of students' leaning experiences that shaped success, which I would have been unlikely to uncover in classrooms known to produce mostly failure (Grubb, 1999, 2013).

I observed every class session of each section for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and then one class per section each week for the remainder of the semester, documenting 126 hours of classroom interactions with detailed field notes. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all three professors during spring break and after the semester, as well as 23 students after the semester concluded. Data collection resulted in 58 documented classroom session observations, six professor interview transcripts, 23 student interviews transcripts, 11 analytic memos, and over 100 pages of course documents handed out to students (i.e. syllabi, assignment sheets, quizzes, tests, rubrics, etc.).

I coded the entire data set to identify “patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events repeat[ing] and [or] stand[ing] out” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). The findings emerged from three main analytic themes: High School Comparisons (students’ understanding of their developmental English coursework compared to their high school coursework), Students’

Strategies (students' approaches to passing the course), and Teaching/Learning Literacy Practices (explicit how-to direction from professors about college-level reading and/or writing). Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytic induction process, I entered the coded observational, interview, and memo data from High School Comparison and Students' Strategies into a matrix display to understand the similarities and differences in how students' approached their coursework, how these approaches changed during the semester, and to what extent their approaches shaped success or failure. To understand how these approaches interacted with pedagogy, I compared the summary finding and individual students' experiences from the data display to the corresponding observational, professor interview, and course documents data coded Teaching/Learning Literacy Practices.

### **Key Findings**

The sample of 23 students I interviewed described a largely disorienting experience in their developmental English course at USCC. Their disorientation resulted from the differences between the coursework and assessment practices they experienced in their urban high school and those in their developmental English course. In their high school, assignments were usually worksheets that simply required selecting correct answers, and success (a passing grade) was predicated upon turning in the completed worksheets by the end of a marking period. In the context of their high schools where many students turned in no work at all, submitting completed assignments without assessment of the assignments quality in exchange for a passing grade emerged as an explicit *quid pro quo* arrangement between teachers and students.

The *quid pro quo* arrangement in high school shaped the students' approaches to coursework in developmental English at USCC (at least initially), whereby they quickly completed assignments without regard to the assessment criteria and expected passing grades for

their effort. However, this approach proved problematic for writing assignments in particular, as it resulted in failure. The students reported that they were surprised to fail the assignments and were even more surprised that their professor required revisions. The students' surprise stemmed from being assessed upon their professor's criteria for college-level writing and a complete ignorance of a revision process that would enable them to meet their professor's expectations. In fact, the student explained that they were neither required to revise nor introduced to the practice in high school.

Assessments in all three courses were heavily weighted to writing assignments, and all three professors' pedagogy focused on helping students develop their writing skills through practice. Generally, all three professors collected initial drafts of written assignments, returned them with feedback, and required the students to revise and resubmit. This feature of their pedagogical approach prompted most of the students I interviewed to seek out and adopt a revision process that they could use to meet their professor's expectations for college-level writing. In fact, after several written assignments that required revising and resubmitting, the students who passed the course began to use revision on their own before submitting a first draft to address feedback they anticipated from their professor. Accordingly, these students were able to earn at least passing grades (some, excellent grades) on their first submission, and thus demonstrated the ability to readily meet the college-level writing expectations of their professor.

In the end, 18 students reported passing at least the composition portion of their course because they were able to develop the capacity to revise an unacceptable draft of an essay assignment into a satisfactory one. The students' adoption of a new approach to writing essays that enabled them meet their professor's expectations hinged upon their professor's feedback and requirement to revise and resubmit the essay assignments.

However, within my sample five students reported not being able to adopt a revision process that would meet with their professor's expectations for college-level writing, and thus they failed their course. These students continued to interpret their professors' feedback and requirements to revise and resubmit through the *quid pro quo* arrangement made explicit in their high school. That is, the students understood their professors' feedback (and the requirement to revise and resubmit) as telling them exactly what sentences to add on or what specific corrections to make, rather than indicating that they had to fundamentally rewrite their essays. These students reported how they experienced confusion and frustration throughout the semester because, despite their efforts at correcting and resubmitting, they continued to fail the assignments. In the end, the students who failed still had no understanding of revision as their professor expected them to do so, and thus they neither understood that they needed to rewrite their drafts, nor understood how to apply the professors' feedback to a revised version.

### **Implications**

#### **Theory**

The findings have at least three theoretical implications for teaching and learning in developmental education. First, *student centered* approaches to teaching require elements of a *teacher centered* approach to help students develop the skills necessary for success. Much of the student success in my sample was shaped by the professors enacting a student-centered pedagogy that facilitated a constructive process (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Generally, all three professors engaged students in a constructive process focused on the problem of conveying meaning through their writing, and the requirements for revised submission helped students reflect upon their approach to the assignments and its usefulness to meeting the assessment criteria. Accordingly, this approach to

teaching created opportunities for the students to build upon and/or rethink their understandings of writing in order to meet the demands of the assignments (Bain, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). In this way, the constructive process of learning required the students to integrate the knowledge they already possessed (i.e. quickly completing assignments for a passing grade) and the new knowledge they were being taught (i.e. how to revise) in order to think and understand differently. The central theme for students who successfully passed their course was that they constructed this knowledge for themselves, and thus were able to apply this knowledge in future assignments with success (Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Indeed, as Ebony explained, she had to blend her old and a new approach “to make it [the new approach] her own.”

However, the students’ construction of knowledge about the necessary revision process was facilitated by elements of a teacher-centered approach whereby the professor (or a tutor) transmitted a certain body of knowledge—in this case knowledge of revision—to students in a hierarchal part-to-whole process (Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Ramsden, 2003). For example, Ebony reported that after failing her first essay she asked Professor Kelly for instructions on how to meet the assessment criteria. She recalled that Professor Kelly told her to “get what you want to tell the reader down first” and then “fill in the body.” This was new information to Ebony and key instructions for a central aspect of drafting and revising.

A purely student centered approach risks assuming that students know what they do not know. That is, to the extent that a professor’s pedagogical intent is to allow students to arrive at their own understanding without explicitly telling them key information needed to meet the professor’s expectations, students might struggle to arrive at the understandings necessary to



pass their courses. Moreover, students could easily get frustrated and quit before they figure it out for themselves. This was evident in Michael's case in which professor Smith avoided telling Michael what to do and instead believed that the feedback would lead Michael to realize that he needed to fundamentally rewrite his essays. Michael never arrived at that understanding and may have benefited from being told exactly what he needed to do to meet the professor's expectation.

Second, the findings underscore the centrality of previous research that asserted that students' learning activities in a course are the "response to the implicit or explicit requirements of their teachers" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 64). The students' efforts in the courses I observed were solely focused on meeting their professor's explicit or implicit expectations communicated via discussion, the syllabus, and/or other course documents (i.e. rubrics). In this way, clear, consistent, and well communicated expectations ultimately shaped new approaches to coursework that enabled students to practice writing in ways that are central to success in college-level courses—namely developing essays through revising. From this perspective, the five students who reported not being able to revise their essays in ways that met their professor's expectations, failure was not just the result of the students' inability to adopt the needed revision process; rather, professors' pedagogical approaches also failed to help students understand that a more fundamental revision process was needed to meet the assessment criteria.

For example, Professor Smith intended for his feedback to help Michael see that he needed to fundamentally rewrite his essays, and Michael worked diligently to comply by fixing errors and adding sentences he believed Professor Smith wanted to see. Michael was in fact trying to respond to Professor Smith's expectations, but to no avail. From a theoretical perspective, the authority of the professor compels students to action inside of the pedagogical relationship, and thus professors' pedagogy has tremendous influence upon how and what (or if)

students learn. In this case, Professor Smith did not explicitly tell Michael to what extent he needed to rewrite his essays, instead Professor Smith intended for Michael to see it for himself. However, Michael was unaware that students rewrite essays, and thus he was unprepared to interpret Professor Smith's feedback as indication that he needed to do so. Accordingly, the findings suggest that students fail in developmental education in part because they cannot engage the pedagogy enacted in the classroom, which in turn, is in part the result of the professors' failure to (a) understand how students interpret the pedagogy, and (b) enact pedagogy that is accessible to the students.

Third, the findings both support and undermine the basic argument that the developmental classroom is a "contact zone... where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt, 1991, p. 1). English scholars have argued that the central challenge that students in developmental English face is bridging the gap between the communication practices of their (marginalized) culture and communication practices valued in higher education (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Bizzell, 1986; Fox, 1990). My findings suggest that to the extent the cultural gap is considered from the perspective of academic work habits that lead to achievement in higher education, students do in fact need to acculturate to be successful. However, the more the line or argument focuses upon how students think and how these ways of thinking are incongruent with success in higher education, the more my findings contradict the argument. For example, Bizzell (1986) argued that writing is more fundamentally a demonstration of thinking than a demonstration of linguistic convention, and thus the central challenge facing students is that they do not think in accordance with the values privileged in higher education. While this maybe (it was not explored in this study), the student's ability to think of original ideas for content in their essay was not their central struggle. Rather, the

students' central struggles were (a) interpreting the feedback from their professors as indicating that they needed a new approach to coursework, and (b) identifying new approaches and adopting them.

Importantly, English scholars have argued that learning college-level literacies in the contact zone is most effective when students are provided with opportunities beyond grammar instruction (Carter, 2006; Rose, 2005; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997; Sternglass, 1997), to grapple with the gap between their culture and the one privileged in the academy (Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986; Fox, 1990). While my findings suggest that content is not as central as some have argued (i.e. Fox, 1990; Soliday, 1996), the opportunity to “grapple” is central to students' success. That is, the students I interviewed only developed the ability to write college-level essays by completing essays using their initial approach, failing, and then having the opportunity to try again using a different approach. Indeed, the opportunity to practice seems to be the recurring theme across the literature. For example, Sternglass' (1997) study that tracked five students who first enrolled in developmental English found that professor feedback and the opportunity to practice was central to their success in college. Sternglass concluded that students took cues about what and how to write from the feedback they were given and responded to professors' challenges to construct and convey meaning in the forms acceptable in college. While my analysis did not explicitly analyze the professors' feedback and how students used it, the students I interviewed stated explicitly how assessments that required multiple submission coupled with feedback from their professor developed their audience awareness and revision practices focused upon communicating their ideas clearly. In fact, the opportunity to write, submit, receive feedback from the professor, and incorporate the feedback into future revisions was critical to helping students develop their writing ability.

Fourth, Shaughnessy (1977) argued that for professors to be successful helping students enrolled in developmental English they must understand that the student is not failing to “hear” the problem in revision, but “sees what he means, rather than what he writes” (p. 48). However, Shaughnessy did not provide evidence that students were revising to hear the problem. My findings suggests that students can hear the dialect of formal writing, and that their failure on writing assignments is less about seeing what they mean in revision, but rather not knowing to—or how to—revise. Regardless, Shaughnessy’s assertion that if a professor comes to understand the logic of the students’ errors, then the professor will see that the student needs to be taught to objectify their writing in review, not given more grammar lessons is supported by my findings. Accordingly, I agree with Shaughnessy (1976), professors must “become a student ... of ... students” (p. 238). More specifically, professors must work to uncover students’ approaches to coursework, understand how these approaches differ from the ones necessary for success, and then teach the students those approaches and the underlying logic.

### **Practice**

My findings have at least two implications for teaching in developmental education. First, the findings contribute to a growing body of literature that suggests developmental English professors must develop courses that avoid remedial pedagogy and provide opportunities for students to practice college-level literacy—reading and writing (e.g. Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Carter, 2006; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013; Hillocks, 1999; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997). Learning experiences that require students to write college-level essays and avoid remedial pedagogy provide students with opportunities to develop college-level writing skills (Grubb, 1999, 2010, 2013). Importantly, students’ success in my sample was a result of both content and assignments that engaged them in college-level literacy practices, as well as

assessments that held students accountable for the content and quality of their essay submissions. The extant literature suggests that these pedagogical practices are exceptional, yet my findings suggest that they are central to students' success, as pedagogy shaped the context in which students developed their practice of revision. Accordingly, the findings suggest that developmental English professors ought to engage students with constructivist pedagogies focused helping students *practice* how to write in ways that are valued in higher education. Additionally, assignments should include numerous opportunities for students to write, submit, and resubmit essay assignments that are then carefully graded with written responses that challenge students to construct and convey meaning in the forms acceptable in college (Sternglass, 1997). The Developmental English professor should be conversant in the rich composition scholarship that addresses these very issues (i.e. Bartholomae, 1985, 1993; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Bizzell, 1986; Carter, 2006; Fox, 1990; Shor, 1997; Soliday, 1996; Soliday & Gleason, 1997).

Second, the findings suggest that students' responses to pedagogy are shaped by their previous educational experiences and may not be the responses professors desire. Accordingly, developmental education professors must develop sensitivities to how students are responding to the course content and pedagogy. Only by understanding how the students are approaching the course and interpreting the enacted pedagogy can a professor know why a student might be having difficulty succeeding.

In this way, my findings reaffirm Shaughnessy's (1977) argument that professors must uncover the logic of the student's error in order to understand how to best teach them. More specifically, developmental education professors need to uncover how students are approaching their coursework, identify how this differs from the approach needed for success, and then

explicitly teach students how they need to approach their coursework. Explicit directions about how to approach the coursework for success should be accompanied by explicit descriptions of the rationale of the new approach so students understand why they need to do it differently. In this way, students will be positioned to adopt approaches to their coursework that will enable them to more independently meet with course expectations. Here, no level of detail ought to be considered common knowledge; rather, my findings suggest that explicitly telling students that they need to read the assignment and take notes, or that they need to begin writing a paper a week before it is due and then revise a time or two before submission may help them understand professors' taken-for-granted expectations.

### **Policy**

There are at least three policy implications from my findings. First, my findings suggest that COMPASS or ACCUPLACER might be unreliable predictors of students' abilities to pass a college-level course (Belfield & Crosta, 2012) because success and failure are to some extent shaped by students' learning experiences, not just the educational background they bring to the course. Whereas placement tests measure some aspect of the students' ability to recall certain features of Standard English, students' success in my sample was shaped by pedagogy that helped them learn how to revise their essays through practice. Additionally, as Belfield and Crosta (2012) argued, a better predictor of a student's ability to pass a college-level course might be their high school GPA. In light of my findings, students who did well in high school were able to identify how to meet the requirements of their teachers (whether in the *quid pro quo* paradigm or not) and readily identify and adopt approaches necessary for success. As Ashley (2001) and Carter (2006) found, once these students enroll in developmental education or a college-level course, they are able to adapt quickly by uncovering how to meet their professor's expectations

and adopting the requisite approaches to their coursework. Accordingly, students' high school GPA could be used as an indicator of who is inclined to quickly develop successful approaches to their coursework and who might need more explicit instruction about how to meet their professor expectations.

Second, the findings suggest that reform policies focused on mainstreaming and compression are shortsighted for at least two reasons. First, mainstreaming and/or compression policies that are aimed at fixing the problem of developmental education largely ignore how valuable these courses can be to students who need to develop key skills necessary for success in college. The large-scale survey research suggests that students who enroll in developmental education and make it to a college-level course have the same, or better, chance of transfer and/or degree attainment as students who were deemed prepared (Bahr, 2010; Bahr, 2008; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010). Even though most students never make it to a college-level course, the learning opportunity in developmental education seems to be central to helping students pass their college-level course at the same (or higher) rate than students deemed prepared (e.g. Bailey et al., 2010). In fact, my findings suggest that in developmental English this appears particularly true because students who were successful developed the ability to independently meet their professor's requirements of college-level writing. Presumably, this better positioned the students for success in all of their future college courses. Therefore, developmental education courses that help students develop the academic skills necessary for success in college are an important component of the community college academic track and should not be eliminated.

Third, my findings suggest that structural interventions like mainstreaming, compression, and learning communities do not address more fundamental problems contributing to attrition.

My study was designed to uncover the interactions among content, professor, and students in classrooms that enacted a mostly student centered pedagogy. My findings suggest that the professors' pedagogical approach in this regard was the central factor in students' success, and thus affirmed a growing body of research that suggests students' learning experiences ultimately shape their success or failure. However, compression and mainstreaming policies like the ones in Connecticut (Inside Higher Ed, 2012) and Florida (Fain, 2013) do not aim to institute student centered pedagogies; rather, the policies only embed support services that rely on students to master course content.

Similarly, learning community initiatives generally enroll cohorts of students in linked developmental education and/or college-level courses with an academic success course requirement (i.e. Barnes & Piland, 2013; Raftery, 2005; Weissman et al., 2012). Aside from the fact that there is little evidence to suggest that these learning community structures are effective (Weissman et al., 2012), they, too, fail to reform students' learning experiences. While academic support services (either in mainstreaming, compression, and/or learning communities) are important aspects of helping students pass their courses, pedagogy is central to shaping students' learning experiences, and thus their success or failure. Accordingly, reform policies ought to eliminate remedial pedagogy and ensure students have ample opportunities to practice the college-level skills they need for success in developmental education and beyond.

### **Future Research**

The findings suggest four areas requiring additional research. First, despite trying to illuminate why most students who enroll in developmental education never make it to a college-level course, most of the students who failed or withdrew from the courses I observed were not represented in my interview sample. Of the 64 students who were initially enrolled in the three



sections I observed, only 45 remained at the end of the semester, and I only spoke with roughly half of those. Accordingly, the findings do not capture the learning experiences of 19 students who withdrew before the end of the semester. While it could be that some of the difficulties and frustration detailed in Chapter IV compelled these students to withdraw, additional research is needed to understand this aspect of the attrition problem.

The central shortcoming of my study design in this regard is that I did not anticipate these students disappearing early in the semester, and I had no plan in place to capture these students' experiences. Future classroom-level research should incorporate plans into the study design to interview these students when they withdraw in order to illuminate why these students left and uncover any features of their developmental education experience that shaped their decision. Such a design might include: (a) explaining to students early in the semester that the researcher would be interested in interviewing them at any point they make a decision to withdraw, (b) securing a commitment to participate in interviews and contact information in the first week or two of the semester, and/or (c) offering a significant financial incentive (i.e. \$50) to participate in an interview at any time during the semester.

Second, the findings suggest that student failure can be largely accounted for by the fact that they were not able to develop approaches to their assignments that would meet with their professor's expectations for college-level writing. However, I did not seek to uncover to what extent the students who did not develop new approaches were otherwise unable to do so. That is, it could be the case that students who failed their course were in fact unable to perform the academic work required to pass because of some other mediating factor, including deficiencies that could limit their academic achievement. A classroom level qualitative study focused solely

on observing and interviewing students who failed their developmental course could help illuminate any limits of pedagogy to help students pass their course.

Third, the findings suggest that students who developed a revision process were able to independently meet their professor's expectation for college-level writing. However, I did not follow the students into their next semester of college-level courses, and thus it is unclear if they (a) enrolled and (b) to what extent they were successful as a result of adopting the revision process. The students who were successful might have discontinued enrollment or otherwise failed before completing their first college-level course. Accordingly, further research is needed to understand how students develop and used new approaches to their coursework in developmental education and beyond. A longitudinal qualitative study that checks in with students as they progress through their college career would help illuminate if and how their adoption of a revision process shaped longer-term success.

Fourth, my findings suggest that students' ability to pass their course was largely a matter of whether they developed new approaches to their coursework, and that developing a new approach was facilitated by their professor's pedagogy. However, my focus on the students' shared experiences left the extent to which other aspects of pedagogy helped or hindered largely unexplored. That is, besides the opportunity to submit an assignment, receive feedback, and revise and resubmit, my research did not compare how dissimilar aspects of the professors' pedagogy shaped different learning experiences. Accordingly, further classroom level qualitative research that provides a comparative analysis of how different pedagogical approaches shape different learning experiences would help illuminate best practices in teaching developmental education.

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Appendix A

Student Participant Solicitation Flyer

\*This project is not a Community College of Philadelphia sponsored project\*

## ***What was your learning experience in English 098/099? I would like to know!***

As a graduate student at Seton Hall University I am seeking volunteers to participate in my research project. Participation is simply a 45-60 minute interview about your learning experience in English 098/099.

For more information, or to volunteer, call Stefan Perun at 267-994-1117 or email [stefan.perun@student.shu.edu](mailto:stefan.perun@student.shu.edu)

\*This project is not a Community College of Philadelphia sponsored project\*



### **More information regarding participation:**

**The research:** Students who decide to participate will have a one-on-one interview with Stefan Perun during April/May. The discussion could last up to 60 minutes. You will not be required to answer specific questions if you do not wish to do so. The discussion will be digitally recorded if you agree to it.

**Participation in this research is voluntary** and can be ended at any time. Also, the decision to volunteer (or not volunteer) will not be disclosed to administrators, staff, or teachers at the Community College of Philadelphia. All comments from the discussions will remain **entirely confidential**. No one's name or identifying characteristics will be used in reports or presentations.

**For students who agree to be digitally recorded**, the audio files and the transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet in Mr. Perun's house. Participants may review the audio file and the transcript. After the research is completed, the audio files will be erased.

Appendix B  
Student Participants

Table 3

*Student Participants in Professor Smith's Class*

Name	Race	Gender	101 Grade	108 Grade
Leslie	Black/White	Female	A	A
Sofia	Latina	Female	Passed (missing data)	Passed (missing data)
Tamica	Black	Female	C	F
Angel	Black	Female	B	A
Precious	Black	Female	B	B
Michael	Black/White	Male	F	F
Manuel	Puerto Rican	Male	No data	No data
Alexus	Black	Female	C	B

Table 4

*Student Participants in Professor Rose's Class*

Name	Race	Gender	101 Grade	108 Grade
Natalia	Dominican	Female	F	F
Jennifer	White	Female	B	A
Saeed	Arab American	Male	B	C
Jada	Black	Female	F	C
Benjamin	Black	Male	F	C
Angela	White	Female	F	D
Bernice	Black	Female	C	C
Sabira	Arab American	Female	B	A

Table 5

*Student Participants in Professor Kelly's Class*

Name	Race	Gender	98 Grade	99 Grade
Victoria	Puerto Rican	Female	Passed	Passed
Jiao	Asian	Female	Passed	Passed
Shanice	Black	Female	Passed	Passed
Derrelle	Black	Male	Passed	Passed
Ebony	Black	Female	Passed	Passed
Aliyah	Black	Female	Passed	Passed
Shana	Black	Female	Passed	Passed

Appendix C  
Interview Protocols



**Student Interview Protocol**

How did you come to be a student at CCP?

What are your goals at CPP? After?

How has the semester gone so far? What grade do you think you might end up with?

Can you describe what you think the professor expected of you this semester in order to be successful?

What did you have to do to get better? What was most challenging? What was the easiest?

Can you describe your approach to classwork? Homework? Reading? Writing?

How much of the reading would you say you did? What strategies did you use in class discussions/papers when you didn't do the readings?

Was there any point during the semester in which you felt discouraged? Motivated?

What difficulties or struggles have you had in this class and/or this semester?

Were any of the assignments confusing? Have you gotten help (office hours/tutor/family/friends) for this class?

What successes have you had?

Are you taking any other classes? How does this class compare to your other classes? High school?

What do you think about the professor?

Could you describe the relationship you developed with the professor?

What do you think are the three biggest things you learned this semester?

Do you think you're a better reader? Writer?

Is there anything else I should know about your experience in this class?

Are you working? What do you do? How many hours? What other commitments outside of school do you have (i.e. kids, etc.)?

What was your high school experience like? What kind of student would you say you were?

What English classes have you taken before this one?

How did you get placed in this English class/level? Did you think you needed it?

Can I follow up with you after the semester to ask what grade you received? If I have additional questions? Maybe via text or email?

### **First Interview with Professors Protocol**

How did you become a developmental education professor at CCP?

How do you think the semester is progressing?

How is this group of students similar or different than groups of students you've had in the past?

What challenges are you having with the class?

What successes are you having with the class?

What do you think the students in this class struggle with most?

Why do you think that is?

Have you changed your pedagogical approach in anyway (now or over time) to address this struggle?

Do you think this struggle is indicative of developmental students?

What do you think students in this class have the easiest time with?

Why do you think this is?

Do you think this is indicative of developmental students?

Have you modified any instruction or content this semester? How so? Why? To what effect?

Could you describe how you decided upon the content of your curriculum this semester?

What is the aim of your curriculum content selection?

How do you assess if your aims are being reached? Are they for this class? If so, how? If not, how? Why?

### **Second Interview with Professors Protocol**

How do you think the semester went?

What was your biggest teaching success this semester?

What was your biggest teaching challenge?

Can you describe your approach to teaching this class this semester?

Why do you use that approach?

How effective would you say your approach to teaching was?

Can you describe the relationship you develop with your students?

What expectations would you say that you had for your students' learning this semester?

Did they meet those expectations?

Can you describe what you think students need to do in order to be successful in the class?

Can a student go from an MP to an A? How?

Do you think your students met their full potential? Why? Why not?

If not, what do you think keeps them from meeting their full potential?

Could you describe how you decided upon the content of your curriculum this semester?

What is the aim of your curriculum content selection?

How do you assess if your aims are being reached? Are they for this class? If so, how? If not, how? Why?

How many students did you start off with? How many students did you retain? How many did you pass?

Appendix D

Code Book

Table 6

*Codes Used in Findings*

Code Name	Code Description	Example of Data	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Example of Excluded Data
High School Comparisons	Descriptions from students about how they understood their learning experiences in developmental English at USCC as different from or similar to their learning experiences in high school.	Student interview: Yeah, we did [learn essay structure in high school]. But we mainly did book reports and.... It's a good [high] school, but like here [at USCC], with [Professor Kelly], she taught me a lot.... I learned how to make an essay outline and how to brainstorm for an essay.... I never really did the brainstorming in high school, I never knew how to do it. So, I guess that's what the big thing was, was the writing process I got out of there [Professor Kelly's developmental English course].	Data were included if they described or implied the differences between a) the coursework in high school and assignments in developmental English, and/or b) differences between the academic expectations in high school and the expectations for assignments in developmental English, and/or c) differences between assessments and grading in high school and assessments and grading in developmental English.	Data were excluded if there was no indication that a given high school experience directly shaped the students' approaches to coursework and/or their success or failure.	Student interview: College is different... because students can choose their own schedule. Back in high school, they would group us based on our intelligence. Like we all was average like C students and all the C students would be put in the same classes. In college, everybody's at a different level so [Professor Rose] has to teach in different levels, which is a little bit annoying because some of the things she would teach is like me and my friends, a couple of my friends, we already know. So, now we're just board in class.
Students' Strategies	Observations or descriptions of students' efforts to pass their class.	Student interview: [After failing]... essay two and essay three I went in his office and asked him about – “all right, what can I add on to this to make it better”? Like “what do you mean”? On his revisions, he gives little comments, “well, what do you mean by this”? And he'll tell me and then I'll add it on my revision...	Data were included if they a) described actions taken by students to understand their professor's expectations for coursework, and/or b) described students' approaches to meeting their professor's expectations for coursework, and/or c) described changes to approaches to coursework to meet their professor's expectations.	Data were excluded if they indicated students' strategies for meeting expectations that might have been important for success in the course, but were only indirectly related to formal assessments.	Classroom observation: Professor Smith has students count off 1-4 and puts them in groups with chapters 9-11 discussion questions... In my group (Angel, Tyrone, Manuel, and Greys) only Angel has read.... As the students are working in the group, they are essentially relying on Angel for the answers. Angel will timidly say something like “burglary” and Manuel probes for answers asking Angel questions like “was he arrested by the police”? This proved effective as then Angel would divulge more of the plot by briefly explaining “he was caught in the pawn shop and convicted of stealing.” Aside for this exchange and one or two similar to it, the group was mostly quiet.

Teaching/ Learning Literacy Practices	Observation or descriptions of explicit how-to directions from professors about college-level reading and/or writing.	Interview with Professor Smith: What [the student] wrote is actually not what the assignment was... So I know that's going to be a lot of work because I know that means they're going to have to start over. But I think part of it is if I sit down and meet with that student, I don't say to them, 'look you're basically going to have to start over.' I try to start with what they've written and talk about what they're doing and how that's different from the essay assignment in this way of – I want them to see that they're going to have to rewrite it...	The code evolved to focus on only on those "how-to directions" from professors about how to draft/revise an essay as this was central to the analysis of how students experienced their course and came to meet with success or failure. Accordingly, data were included if they a) detailed assignment expectations (i.e. rubric data), b) reported professor/student exchanges inside and outside of the classroom (i.e. office hour discussions) about how to meet the professor's expectations for writing assignments, and/or c) reported student discussions with tutors about college-level writing and/or meeting their professor's expectations for writing assignments.	Several data were explicit "how-to directions" but were excluded because the literacy practice was not central to helping students revise unacceptable drafts into acceptable ones. This code initially accounted for almost 75% of all classroom observational data; however, most of these data were excluded because although presumably the practices were important criteria for a passing essay, they were not necessarily germane to what the students reported as central to their learning experience and/or passing/failing their course.	Classroom observation: Professor Smith passes out and American Psychological Association Basic Format sheet that provides some basic rules and examples of the APA reference formats.... He reads through the examples and asks questions like 'what do you think the 11 indicates'? The students are engaged and answering his questions. As they guess wrongly or rightly he tells them so and they identify all the parts of the basic reference types. Using the list of reference types, Professor Smith asks the students which type they would use to reference the introduction of the edited book that will be the focus of their first paper. There are several wrong guesses as Professor Smith guides the students to the correct answer, "chapter of an edited book." After Professor Smith helps the students arrive at the correct format for their essay, he tasks them with writing down the reference in APA format. All the students are engage and begin individual work on the task...
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Table 7

*Codes Not Used in Findings*

Code Name	Code Description	Example of Data
Hard Work	Students' descriptions/assessment of their hard work (or lack of) and professors descriptions/assessments of students' hard work (or lack of).	Interview with Michael: I know – every teacher has said this to me since grade school, that I'm not working to my full potential and... I get mad because I am. I'm working on these essays as hard as I can. ...I'm working my ass off on these essays...
Professor Feedback	Feedback from professors to students about students' or a student's coursework or class participation. Does not include data about feedback on student's essay assignments. Those data were coded under Teaching/Learning Literacy Practices.	Classroom observation: Professor Smith begins the class by returning the students annotations and quizzes. He tells the class that generally the annotations were good, but some students need to make more margin notes, look up vocab, and note connections with other texts.
Professorial Authority/ Student Authority	Observations or descriptions of students or professors exercising authority and/or negotiating the authority of the other.	Classroom observation: After reviewing the syllabus, Professor Smith asks the students to get into small groups of 5 or 6... to discuss "rules and/or policies they [the students] would like to observe this semester." The room goes dead silent. Junior begins going group to group to get students talking. ...Junior walks over to the group I'm in and asks the five students what they think the policy for student participation should be. One student replies "I don't even care." Professor Smith persists, asking the group if they think class should just dissolve into chaos. Another student says "no." Junior tells them to think of a policy they would like to observe then for student participation. The group quickly agrees that the professor should just call on students randomly or pick students that are not sharing like "normal." Junior pushes, asking "whose responsibility is it to get students to share?" "The teacher" one student replies with others quickly agreeing. Junior acknowledges the response and walks away.
Professor's Interest in Student Success	Students' or professors' descriptions/understandings of professor's interest in student success.	Student interview: Well, he [Professor Smith] really helpful. He wants you to pass the class. It's not like, 'oh, he's putting you out there, just do the work and whatever grade you get, you get.' No. He encourages people to come to his office hours... like for essay two, I had emailed him and I told him I needed help with the introduction. He emailed me and told me, 'okay, this is my office hours. You can come and we can talk about it, how to construct it,' all of that. So I went to his office hours for that too and it was really useful. But it's not like he's making you just, 'oh, I don't want to help you. I gave you the work and I don't want to help you with it.'
Right/Wrong	Students or professors' descriptions of things as right and wrong or correct and incorrect or broken and fixed.	Classroom observation: As class was getting started Janay mentioned that she was not sure if her homework was "right." I asked her if she thought that the professor would be grading it like that (right or wrong) and she told me no because on Wednesday when she could write a beginning to the essay in class, she told Professor Kelly that she had two ideas and did not know which one was "right." Janay reported that Professor Kelly told her to write both and that she was not being "judged." Janay told me that she wasn't worried about being judged, but that she still "just want[s] to be right."



Students' Struggle or Ease	Students' descriptions of their experience with aspects of their course with which they struggled or found easy.	<p>Student interviews: Easy: Like a lot more work because it's a college level class so I was anticipating essays every week and stuff like that. I felt like [Professor Kelly] prepared me a lot for this so whenever I get an essay, I don't see it as a big essay form if I do the whole outlining and stuff. It's not that hard. It's pretty easy. Struggle: I can't write a thesis statement. I can't start it off with an introduction because I don't know how-cause you know how [Professor Kelly] explained to us about how we have to view it as your deep – you know how you're writing – not writing to the audience--but like sometimes when I write I write to myself, like I'm talking to myself and not nobody else. And I'm not trying to explain it to anybody else because I'm explaining it to myself. And I know it, so I don't know how to explain it to other people.</p>
Classroom Resistance	Observations of students resisting classroom directions, activities, and/or teaching.	<p>Classroom observation: Professor Smith asks the students to get into small groups of 5 or 6. The students are sluggish and make halfhearted attempts at turning their desks in the tight space toward one another. Several groups are un-discernible. Junior attempts to understand the chaos, settling for what one student explained as “three groups of six and one of five” as he pointed to the other students in the room.</p>
Teaching Philosophy	Professors' descriptions of their teaching philosophy.	<p>Professor interview: There's this kind of chart that I found really helpful for thinking about stuff in the classroom.... You have this support along one spectrum or axis and then control around the other one. So there's sort of this idea that if you have not a lot of support and not a lot of control, it's really neglectful. If you're moving further along and you have a lot of support and not a lot of control, it's becomes a little permissive and in this position, this is the teacher not doing stuff, this is the teacher doing things for the students. I'm trying to get to high support and high control.</p>