A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Listening to Students About Learning

Andrea Conklin Bueschel

A Report from
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
STRENGTHENING PRE-COLLEGIATE EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES
2008

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College is about having a career after high school, after college, so you want students to understand the material and not just get good grades in class. I feel like it'd be better for the students to actually understand the material and for the teachers to change their teaching so that the students get a real understanding.
–Student, Los Medanos College

Students get it. **By the time they get to college, they know a good deal about education. They know that grades do not always reflect "real understanding." They know that not every class is the same and that not all teachers teach the same way. They know that students learn in different ways, and they understand that how teachers teach has very real consequences for their future. They understand that they have a role in their own success.**

Students who come to college underprepared are especially attuned to these realities. Recent reports from education researchers and in the mainstream media point to how few of the growing numbers of students entering college underprepared move successfully through the system. But students do not need reports and headlines to understand how much learning matters and how elusive success can be. For them the challenge is personal and immediate: if they can't get the education they need, then they can't get a job that pays the rent, read the rental lease, or calculate the monthly budget. If they don't succeed, there are real consequences—for them as individuals and for all of us as a society. This problem is not just one of depressing statistics, but of people whose life chances rise or fall depending on their performance in our community colleges.

Too often, community college students taking basic skills classes have been exposed throughout their earlier schooling to the same material taught in the same way multiple times with unsuccessful results (see, for example, Grubb and Associates, 1999). Their knowledge tends to be precarious, and often they haven't mastered the art of being a good student, let alone content knowledge. The chances of failure are high indeed.

There are many approaches to this challenge. Often discussions of community colleges—and the many underprepared students who attend them—focus on financial aid policies, student background, and support services of various kinds. Real gains have been made by focusing on these non-instructional or extracurricular aspects of students' lives. In addition to addressing

SPECC PROJECT RESOURCES

"Listening to Students About Learning" is one of a number of SPECC products and publications developed by Carnegie staff members. For a full listing, see www.carnegiefoundation.org/specc.

these factors, however, there is much to be gained from a focus on the classroom itself, especially in the pre-collegiate (developmental or basic skills) courses that are supposed to prepare students for college-level work.[1]

In particular, this essay focuses on how **listening to students talk about learning can help them become more active partners in their own education, more engaged in the classroom, and better positioned to succeed.** A large literature on adult learning supports the value of student engagement and partnership, insights that were brought home in a recent project undertaken with 11 California community colleges sponsored by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Faculty who participated in the Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC) project, used technology, different class structures, learning communities, lab components, and supplemental instruction to help developmental students master material they had struggled with in the past. At the same time, these teachers of pre-collegiate English and mathematics used a variety of strategies to become better observers of student learning and help students themselves become more aware of their needs as learners.

CAMPUSES PARTICIPATING IN SPECC

- Cerritos College
- Chabot College
- City College of San Francisco
- College of the Desert
- College of the Sequoias
- Glendale Community College
- Laney College
- Los Medanos College
- Merced College
- Pasadena City College
- West Hills College District

Perhaps the most common message from our interviews with SPECC students (like the young woman quoted at the beginning of this essay) is that students care about their educational experiences.[2] In many cases, students didn't think about how their classes were taught until they saw a teacher do something different from traditional instruction (especially lecture format). Once they were exposed to different practices and styles—whether group work, different technology, or new types of assessment—they felt more confident about articulating what helped them learn best. Not only can innovations in teaching improve students' mastery of content, they can also make students better learners. Perhaps the most important message is that teachers can accomplish a great deal when they treat students as valuable partners in improving teaching and learning.

The Case for Innovation

Students who start California community colleges as first-time students hoping to get a certificate, a degree, or transfer to the four-year college sector have only small chances of success: approximately one in four degree seekers beginning community college in 1999-2000 completed their program in six years (Moore and Shulock, 2007, p. 7). And the prospects are worse for those who start in pre-collegiate courses. These students may not even get to the transfer-level courses in those fields, much less actually graduate or transfer. According to the Center for Student Success, "Only one-quarter of students initially enrolling in a reading fundamentals course in community college ever enroll in a transfer-level English class, and only 10 percent of students beginning in a basic math course ever enroll in a transferable math course" (2005, cited in Moore and Shulock, 2007, p. 12). Indeed, most of our SPECC colleges cite a figure of around 10 percent who move successfully from the lowest level pre-collegiate course to a transfer level course.

There is, in fact, widespread concern that these students' limitations in basic academic skills contribute to high attrition rates in courses throughout the curriculum and to increasing pressures on faculty throughout the college to lower standards in order to help struggling students move on. Clearly, the constituency for better ways to teach and reach underprepared students is, or should be, college-wide.

Beyond dimming students' outlook for completion, the inability to successfully complete the most basic-level courses also has tremendous implications for literacy and numeracy more generally. Although the SPECC campuses focused on pre-collegiate programs for this project, it is clear that *all* programs, including technical and vocational programs, benefit when their students are able to read well, communicate clearly in writing, and handle basic calculations.

In fact, a very large proportion of community college students start higher education needing work at some level of the basic skills sequence. Although it is difficult to track exactly which and how many students need this kind of remedial work,[3] SPECC campuses cite figures of up to 90 percent for their first-time students. This figure appears to be in line with California community college students more generally, where the Chancellor "recently stated that 90 percent of incoming students test below college level in math and over 70 percent test below college level in reading and/or writing" (Moore and Shulock, 2007, p. 12).

Perhaps the most significant point to draw from these data is simply that a great many students on these campuses have skills in reading, writing, and mathematics that are below college level. And while such students may need to pass (or test out of) developmental courses in English or math to begin college-level study in these particular fields, they do not need to do so to enroll in most other college-level courses.[4] Thus the issue isn't just one for teachers of clearly designated developmental education courses: a student taking a pre-collegiate writing class may also be taking a regular college course in history or biology or industrial design. There is, in fact, widespread concern that these students' limitations in basic academic skills contribute to high attrition rates in courses throughout the curriculum and to increasing

pressures on faculty throughout the college to lower standards in order to help struggling students move on. Clearly, the constituency for better ways to teach and reach underprepared students is, or should be, college-wide.

Of course, underprepared students are not all alike. Indeed, because of their numbers, they are likely to exhibit the same range of diversity as the particular community college's student population as a whole. They may be just out of high school or returning after years of life experience; they are likely to be juggling a variety of work and family responsibilities in addition to school. Some are just one course below college level in one subject; some are several courses below in both English and mathematics. This diversity complicates the already challenging task of teaching basic skills to adults, who are likely to lack self-confidence as learners and fear failure. Indeed, like many of their peers who do pass the placement tests, they have come to college used to thinking of teaching and learning as what Mike Rose calls "a kind of inert transmission" (1989, p. 190), with little or no experience in the kinds of problem-solving that college students actually need to do. These students may come *unprepared* for and *unfamiliar* with complex work, but—as teachers who listen carefully understand—they are *not incapable* of doing it (Cox, 2004, p. 10). As colleagues from one campus participating in SPECC put it: "We have learned that many of our students have the ability to do…very significant learning that absolutely puts them on the pathway to success in college" (Chabot College, SPECC Interim Report, 2007, Appendix, p. 3).

Making Learning More Visible

These long-standing issues in community college education have spurred a great deal of innovation nationwide, including in the California community colleges participating in the SPECC program. While these innovations differ in their particulars, they share a common theme: the potential to make learning and the learning process more visible to teachers and students alike.

One of the more common approaches these colleges have adopted is a learning community structure, which usually pairs two co-registered courses (a developmental English or mathematics class is usually paired with another developmental course in the same sequence, or with a college-level academic class) and often includes a counseling component as well (either a one-unit class taught by a counselor, or a dedicated counselor who does small group or individual meetings with students in the learning community). The primary goal of most learning communities is to create an environment where students get to know their classmates and instructors better, and where learning is reinforced across subjects. But another advantage is that learning communities are teaching communities, too, where instructors consult on syllabi, pedagogy, and students (Tinto, 1998; see also Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education). For example, at Merced College, when a reading course and an industrial design course were taught together, the reading instructor used the design course's required software manual as the reading text, and the design instructor attended most of the reading lessons—thereby gaining greater opportunity to listen carefully to what students could (and could not yet) do.

Another approach that some SPECC campuses have employed is supplemental instruction (SI). Simply put, the instructor invites a student who has previously been successful in that class to attend all of the class meetings and to hold additional voluntary meetings with small groups outside of class. The dual purpose here is not only to help students consolidate knowledge in a less intimidating setting, but also to have the student instructor model good student behavior in the classroom (see Center for Supplemental Instruction, 1998). Some of the principles of SI are reflected in other approaches as well. Many faculty have tried to create less intimidating settings by incorporating small group work, having more group discussions, and/or getting students comfortable in tutoring centers or libraries. Helping students engage more fully in their courses—both with the material and with their classmates and instructors—is often the goal of these efforts. At their best, these innovations give students well-structured opportunities to articulate what they do and don't understand about the content and to share strategies for working through difficulties; and they give teachers a better chance to find out what their students are really thinking, and to plan their own next pedagogical steps.

Some faculty members on SPECC campuses are also finding ways to capitalize on students' interest in and comfort with technology. They are not only incorporating additional electronic ways to convey the subject material, but also making it more easily accessible online. Students are often asked to complete assignments online and are able to track their own progress. Aside from the overall hope that a different method of conveying information will help students retain and master it, the use of technology also creates many more opportunities for feedback,

more frequently and with lower stakes. Not only does the instructor have a better sense of students' learning, the students themselves can gain better insight into their own progress in the course.

Like all educational innovations, the results of these efforts are likely to be mixed. However, SPECC's early results support other studies in suggesting that even when course success rates (grades) haven't gone up significantly, retention (course completion) tends to improve, and so does persistence to the next semester and beyond. These measures matter: if students are retained and persist, there are more opportunities for success in the long-term. As a recent report from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2006) notes, "Research shows that the more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter they study—the more likely they are to learn, to stick with their studies, and to attain their academic goals" (p. 4). The same research shows the importance of early intervention: "Students who successfully completed a developmental course—any developmental course—in their first semester (earning a C or better) were, from that point forward, more likely to persist and succeed than other groups, including those who did not need any developmental education" (p. 16). It is imperative that we take advantage of students' willingness to come in the door and find a way to capitalize on that willingness early in their careers.

Anytime a student gets more involved in learning and learns more, that's better, regardless of level of instruction or preparation. And this is the primary goal of educational innovation in community college: to improve students' competence, confidence, and capacity to keep on learning.

Research on specific innovations (for example, learning communities, SI, and technology) highlights similar results: students who experience non-traditional course structures and pedagogy tend to be more engaged, perform as well or better, and persist longer than other students.[5] As Tinto (2007) points out, "Students will get more involved in learning, spend more time learning, and in turn learn more when they are placed in supportive educational settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide frequent feedback about their learning, and require them to actively share learning with others" (PPT presentation, slide 14). Anytime a student gets more involved in learning and learns more, that's better, regardless of level of instruction or preparation. And this is the primary goal of educational innovation in community college: to improve students' competence, confidence, and capacity to keep on learning.

Listening to Students

Listening to students talk about learning is essential to the innovation process. Innovation is risky in higher education, especially when it upsets long-held and widely supported expectations for interaction between teachers, students, and subject matter. Whatever problems appear to be addressed by new approaches like learning communities, supplemental instruction, small group interaction, or technology, new issues are sure to arise and invite continuing investigation. In particular, it is important to ask questions that get at "the most crucial component of teaching practice: Understanding how students themselves experience the learning situation" (Cox 2004, p. 8). This is why the campus teams participating in SPECC coupled their innovations with arrangements to support faculty in various kinds of classroom inquiry. And it is why the Carnegie team arranged to interview students, singly and in focus groups, during site visits to these colleges.

Although the students' answers to our questions reflect the wide diversity of students who attend California community colleges, responses clustered around four main areas: how innovative basic skills classes are different from traditional ones; the affective effects of these differences; the importance of good "studenting" behavior; and the need for a range of approaches. Each of these in turn reinforces the value of student feedback and input in the classroom innovation process.

Differences Between Innovative and Traditional Classes

In describing how innovative classes are different from traditional ones, students cited class activities (discussion, group work), teacher interaction (asking more questions, soliciting feedback), interaction with classmates, and instructor accessibility. Whatever the particulars, the key point seems to be that students notice when things are different, which in turn helps them think about their own learning and their role in that process.

Most students don't have problems with lectures per se, rather the over-reliance on them. Students can be quite articulate about how lecturing can work well, if it's combined with careful questioning to reinforce new information. As one developmental math student at Los Medanos College commented:

> It's not that I don't really like lectures, [but] I want the whole class [not] just to be about lectures. I feel like I'm not going to learn from this; it's going to go in one ear and out the other. But [our instructor] can lecture us on what we're going to do, and he gives our assignment and he walks around. He'll help you and he'll help you until you actually understand it. He'll ask you, 'Well, how did you get this? Why did you get it? Why did you get that?' He asks us to make sure we know it.

In addition, this student appreciated combining lectures with opportunities to work with other students in small groups. "If I'm working with a partner, we get the answers with each other…[Alone] I can look at a problem and look at it and just look at it. I can look at this problem and [think], 'I don't know where to start.' …[But] once I get that jump-start from someone, like a teacher or my partner, then I got it. So, learning from lectures and just

lectures? No, I can't learn." Clearly, this student not only understands the role of different pedagogical styles and structures, but, just as important, realizes the impact they have on her own learning.

Students also benefit from instructor efforts to make the material relevant. Many students, particularly those who have not been academically successful, have a hard time making connections and synthesizing information, especially when the teacher presents things in ways that don't look exactly the same as they do in the book. Yet to move students toward more complex ways of thinking, faculty need to help them see that the course material has life beyond the printed page.

Being exposed to new instructional strategies and structures makes students more aware of deficiencies in their traditional, non-SPECC classes. Across subjects and disciplines, students appreciate that these alternative approaches can make a difference, even suggesting that other classes might benefit from similar changes.

One way of helping students with this transition, and keeping them engaged, is to find ways to make what's presented in the text more relevant and connected to students' lives. Another Los Medanos math student put it this way: "[The instructor] goes back and kind of makes sure that you understand what was said in the book, how it will play out in the real world…because the book, the book's alright, but it's not necessarily a hundred percent exactly what's in the notes. Once you see a problem that applies to these concepts, she ties it back to the real world." A student in an English reading and writing learning community in the West Hills College District stressed the importance of multiple opportunities to understand and apply something new, recognizing that it might take more than one attempt to make sense of something. "Both of the teachers [in the learning community] give more examples and do more group activities on the computer and on the board. And we'll go up on the board. It's more like hands-on, not just like listening and listening."

Being exposed to new instructional strategies and structures makes students more aware of deficiencies in their traditional, non-SPECC classes. Across subjects and disciplines, students appreciate that these alternative approaches can make a difference, even suggesting that other classes might benefit from similar changes. Here's one of the comparisons we heard in our interviews: "See, in my [traditional] math class, my teacher, as soon as she teaches something, she expects that everybody gets it. And in my [learning community] class, even if you don't get something, [the instructor] always puts us in groups every day, so we always ask each other, 'Oh, what did that mean?' You know, 'Oh, that's what that means.' And if we did that in math, I think I'd get it. I think I learn better from my peers, too." These students, and the many others not quoted here, have learned not only how a different approach can change a class, but also how their own response to that approach can affect their learning.

Affective Outcomes

In our interviews with students, the most salient outcomes of innovative courses were affective ones, and these grew out of the distinctive qualities students perceived as characterizing SPECC instructors and classes. Many students talked about confidence, connection to

classmates, and trust in the teacher and the learning process. The challenge in thinking about the role of affective outcomes is that it can be easy to just enjoy the feel-good aspect of it. Many students spoke glowingly about certain instructors and classes; clearly, they were having a very different educational experience than they had in the past. That's a good in itself, of course, but what's more important is that these positive feelings seem to contribute both to students' overall connection to the institution and to their willingness to try new things as learners.

For example, a Chabot College student, describing her experience in the Springboard to Transfer learning community,[6] commented, "I think that learning communities are good for everybody, because when you're in the community, you build trust in yourself, not just with the people in the community. For me it was kind of hard, because I just came out of high school into college, and the community helped me out. [My classmate's] been in college and she helped me out and I learned it from her. And everybody has their own experience, so we all learn from each other." Students clearly see a link between feeling connected to the college and to peers and staying in school. Another student in the same learning community noted: "It empowers you so greatly. School is always something that hurt me, because I didn't know how to do it and I felt so scared, and it could've stopped my college career because that's how bad it was. But now I feel very empowered in everything I do."

Sometimes the simplest actions can have deep impact. All teachers are overextended, and this is particularly true on community college campuses. But even the most basic gesture of listening and being open to students, especially early in their college careers, can have a long-term effect. Thus a student commented that her English learning community instructor was "totally open to making time for you, and the more you're with her the more you start to feel like this is someone who is going to really help me get through my college experience." This student isn't just talking about one conversation that helped her get through a difficult time, but rather the overall feeling of having a bond with her teacher.

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Students in successful learning communities, such as the one at Chabot, also feel supported by peers. "The support that you get in the community is a lot more than what you would get outside of the community. So it's better to learn in little communities, groups or whatever, because not just you, but all the students, might benefit off of it…we can help each other out, instead of always going to the teacher, and having them repeat themselves or having them try and explain it to us, when we could first find it out, or try to find out within the community that you're in." Indeed, some expected that they would be able to take their new confidence about learning with them, beyond any one particular course and beyond college. "As a [participant in a] learning community you grow with everybody, you understand how other people learn…I feel like I can apply it to other real-life situations."

"Studenting" Behavior

What does it take to make it through a course? In most classes, the focus is on material: covering it in a set amount of time and hoping that students will master and retain enough of it to move on. While mastery is ultimately important, there are many indications that the ability to manage the workload and sustain consistent effort is important too.[7] The good news is that even students who haven't been successful in the past are willing to show up and try college. The bad news is that their version of being a student is almost entirely passive, that of an empty vessel waiting to be filled (Cox, 2004, p. 214). Although that approach hasn't worked for them in the past, students are not always clear on what the alternatives are. So innovative instructors are taking steps to help students become more active learners.

Working on the principle that the best way to learn something is to teach it, some SPECC faculty have found ways to put the student in the teacher's shoes, like helping students calculate what grades they need in order to pass the course, or even having students actually teach part of a class. Others have helped students learn the arts of critical thinking: what it means to judge and question information that would otherwise be accepted on authority, and to make sense of the many sources of information (and misinformation) that confront them daily.

Sometimes these new steps simply involve instructors being more explicit about what they expect from students, and opening up the black box of learning that many students were unable to see into before. Instructors recognize that most, if not all, of their students have not been taught things that other students master much earlier in their careers. As a student in a reading and writing learning community at City College of San Francisco explained: "I'm better at getting work done on time, putting full effort, participating in class, taking leadership—learning, you know, how to do stuff on the computer."

Of course, learning is not easy. Regardless of how clearly instructors explain things, students have to realize that sometimes success requires doing more work than they're used to. In the past, hard work meant doing the same thing over and over, often without success. But it's possible for a good teacher to change that equation. As a developmental math student at Pasadena City College described it, there was still lots of time devoted to review and practice in his pre-collegiate math class, but he's finally making progress:

> They showed me how to do it in the class…I have to read the book, I have to do the work, and I have to remember just by writing stuff down a lot. A standard routine sort of thing, and just repeat, repeat, repeat, and I get it burned in my head. Then I go do whatever I have to do with it, but I remember a lot more stuff here than I did in high school, and I have changed my learning patterns.

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teach part of a class. Others have helped students learn the arts of critical thinking: what it means to judge and question information that would otherwise be accepted on authority, and to make sense of the many sources of information (and misinformation) that confront them daily. As a student in a developmental English class at Chabot College reported: "I'm not just open-minded in class, I'm open-minded outside the classroom now. [The instructor] tells us she wants us to learn some of the things not only for in the classroom but outside, so you can't be manipulated and taken advantage of. And it definitely helped overall in my life, not just in the classroom."

No "One Size Fits All"

There are many approaches, strategies, and activities that seem to be making a difference with students. But students themselves recognize that no one size fits all. "Everybody has different learning styles, so some people can sit there through a whole lecture and can take notes and study well. And then you have some other teachers that interact with the students and some students learn better like that. So it just depends on the student and the teacher's teaching style." This remark by an English learning community participant at the City College of San Francisco underlines the importance of helping students early on to find out more about themselves as learners, so that they may develop strategies for doing well with a variety of teaching styles.

But the responsibility should not fall on students alone. A genuine, sustained inquiry process on the part of teachers is needed as well, one that recognizes the value of listening to what students themselves have to say about teaching and learning. By doing so—and by developing new ways to address what they find out—teachers can have a greater impact on students' understanding of the material, connection to the class, confidence in their abilities, and habits and skills as students. To that end, one of SPECC's lessons is the value of involving students explicitly and deliberately in classroom innovation and inquiry.

Students as Partners in Innovation and Inquiry

There is a lot to learn from students about learning basic skills. However, the power of their insights is limited if no one solicits, welcomes, or uses them. Teachers recognize that it is important for many reasons to regularly assess students' understanding of course material, and that there are better and worse ways to do so. But it is also valuable to get students' feedback about classroom changes as a regular part of the ongoing process of improvement. This will engage students as partners in innovation and inquiry, while helping teachers avoid missteps and prevent practices that aren't working from going on too long.

For SPECC, as well as for many other Carnegie Foundation programs, this kind of ongoing inquiry is an important part of both scholarship and professional development. The willingness to engage in and reflect on questions of practice, pedagogy, and assessment (among other things), both individually and collectively, is a hallmark of a scholarship of teaching and learning that, ultimately, leads to better outcomes for students (see Huber and Hutchings, 2005; McKinney, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Just as students benefit when the instructor makes clear how the course material is relevant to their lives, so too do faculty benefit when they have opportunities to understand more deeply the teaching and learning processes in their own classrooms. Students have a role to play in this work.

The SPECC faculty have been enthusiastic about exploring interesting questions or problems they've encountered in their classrooms, using data and tracking progress. Students can be an invaluable resource as faculty try to understand what seems to be working (or not) and also why and how. For example, at City College of San Francisco (CCSF), faculty organized student focus groups, where teacher-partners interviewed each other's students on a wide range of pedagogical issues, from course content and materials to instructors' methods and students' learning styles. "The goal of the student focus groups," the CCSF team writes, "is to help teachers inform themselves about student perspectives and to incorporate this information back into course curriculum and methodology. This activity also encourages students to contribute to classroom methodologies and instruction and to critically reflect on their experiences as learners" (SPECC Report, 2007, p. 6).

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The student comments quoted in this essay are excellent examples of student feedback on the work faculty have already done to inform classroom change. Indeed, students themselves understand the value of inquiry as a basis for change. According to a Los Medanos College developmental math student (also quoted at the start of this essay):

> I would say that some teachers understand their material, but they're not presenting it to their students correctly. And maybe if we do have [more of these classes]…they'll understand that some kids aren't understanding the material, and maybe they need to change their ways in teaching. And I feel like it'll be better for them to change their ways of teaching so that the students will understand, and not just get a passing grade.

Consistently throughout the project, educators have been interested in learning more about what the students we interviewed had to say. Some of this interest came from the faculty who taught them, which is a reminder that no matter how much instructors think they know about their students, there is always more to learn. As one early proponent of greater inquiry into teaching and learning processes explained, "regular interviews of one's students can enhance the teacher's articulation of how his or her students respond to the materials of the course, the classroom process, and the teacher's intellectual style" (Katz, 1985, pp. 4-5).

There are several important processes occurring here. As Huber and Hutchings note, the scholarship of teaching and learning involves faculty asking questions about their students' learning, gathering and exploring evidence that can shed light on those questions, trying out and refining new insights, and going public with one's results (2005, pp. 20-29). In the simplest form (though it is certainly not easy), the teacher looks at her own practice, tries new approaches, assesses for understanding, evaluates outcomes, and shares and talks about them with colleagues.

Often this process of close listening can suggest relatively simple changes that could improve students' experiences. For example, students might reveal the anxiety raised by an otherwise promising innovation, like instituting a common exam for all sections of a developmental math course. Perhaps, teachers might conclude, it would help if students were familiar with the nature and purpose of this kind of exam beforehand, so that they don't lose the small comfort they have traditionally drawn from relying on their sense of what their own teacher is likely to be looking for on a test.

Indeed, asking students about their experience—whether in the context of a new or an old approach—can be central to engaging them actively in learning. In her book "*What About Rose?" Using Teacher Research to Reverse School Failure*, Smokey Wilson of Laney College provides striking examples of what it means to do this work with academically inexperienced students.[8] She takes readers through the struggles her students had in developmental writing, explores the strengths and weaknesses of the educational theories she consulted to help her shed light on the problems, and discusses the "writing conferences" she developed to help students turn talk into writing by discussing the experience with their teacher and each other. As Joseph Katz argues, "Making the student an object of study and engaging the student's collaboration in his or her own learning are prime conditions for the development of the art of teaching. Repeated interviews with students…[lead] to a heightened awareness of how students study and learn, and they have elicited valuable suggestions of how teachers might better reach their students" (Katz, 1985, p. 6).

It is clear that involving students in the inquiry process, not just as subjects or objects, but also as participants, has tremendous potential. There are cognitive and metacognitive skills that students can learn and master. And there are clear signs that *just being asked* helps students think about their own learning and how they can succeed. CCSF's student focus groups, mentioned above, suggest one way to proceed. On other SPECC campuses, faculty are sharing data and asking students for hypotheses about what they're seeing. Some invite students to interview other students. And in one notable case a group of students, in collaboration with a faculty member, created a video about reading in which they developed questions and created a narrative about students' experiences with reading (McFarland, et al, 2007). From this powerful video, two themes emerged. "Our students' sense of self, sense of future possibility, is very tied up with their facility as readers; and our faculty [across the curriculum] provide very little guidance or instruction around the assigned reading" (Chabot College, Hewlett site visit handout, 2007). All of these examples of engaging students as partners in inquiry provide valuable learning experiences both for students and for the faculty who listen to them.

In the majority of the interviews and focus groups we conducted, students made a point of saying how much they appreciated being asked for their thoughts. In some cases, it was clear that they had gotten used to teachers asking for their feedback, and they were reflective and articulate in relating their experiences. In other cases, they were just getting used to the idea that they had something to say about their own education. But even in the short time we had with these students, it was clear that they could not only benefit from having someone with whom to share their thoughts on learning, but also that their insights could help identify what's going right (or wrong) in their education, and suggest new directions for innovation and reform.[9] The payoff can be large: "We have reached out to the students to tell us what their experience is and they have told us…We know creating good learning environments where students are trusted and guided to strong learning that leads them onward and gives them traction, is what we mean by basic skills instruction" (Chabot College, SPECC Interim Report, 2007, Appendix, p. 3).

It is clear that involving students in the inquiry process, not just as subjects or objects, but also as participants, has tremendous potential. There are cognitive and metacognitive skills that students can learn and master. And there are clear signs that just being asked helps students think about their own learning and how they can succeed.

It is fitting to end this essay with a reminder of how thoughtful students can be about good teaching. As one particularly helpful student (perhaps a future teacher?) remarked:

> I think perhaps teachers need to look at their coursework and maybe identify some very key definitions that they're going to be building on throughout the rest of the year, really hammer those home, rather than hoping and praying that the students get it. Because you have to have the foundation before you go further down the road, or these kids are going to be lost for the rest of the semester. And even if they understand some of the later sessions, once you get back to [earlier concepts] that

> relate to the beginning of the course, those students are going to get discouraged towards the end of that course. That could even affect other work that they already understood, simply because they get confused on those issues. I think teachers really need to take greater interest in the way their courses are structured, rather than just following a textbook from point A to point B. Throw a few twists in there, make things interesting, and hammer home the concepts.

Students who have not been successful in school present many challenges, but they can also be a key asset in overcoming those challenges. We owe it to ourselves—and to them—to ensure that we make them partners in improving their chances for success.

NOTES

[1] These courses are often called remedial, developmental, and/or basic skills. The project reported on in this essay has chosen "pre-collegiate" because it seems more representative of the course itself and signals work that does not receive transfer-level credit. But we use the other terms interchangeably as well.

[2] Because SPECC project staff wanted to model the value of listening to students about their educational experiences, we made it a priority to talk with students on each SPECC campus. These interviews took place between February 14 and April 18, 2006. At each campus, we convened one or more focus groups of three to 15 students enrolled in classes with various SPECC interventions (mostly Learning Communities and/or teachers in Faculty Inquiry Groups or Teaching Communities). At eight of the 11 campuses, we interviewed individually an additional 16 students, mostly recent high school graduates in pre-collegiate courses.

[3] For example, students may skip the placement test, as it is possible to take many courses without taking pre-collegiate prerequisites; alternately, they may take the test and still not enroll in the recommended course.

[4] In California, a 1991 judgment in a case brought by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) has been widely interpreted to make placement in pre-collegiate courses only advisory, not mandatory (see Moore and Shulock, 2007, p. 27). In addition, faculty in many academic and vocational courses prefer not to have developmental courses as prerequisites, because the process of establishing requirements is so difficult, and could also significantly lower enrollments. In a new policy report, *It Could Happen*, Shulock, Moore, and colleagues recommend changes in policies and practices that would make it more likely that "students are placed in courses appropriate to their skill levels, and any needed remediation is begun immediately upon enrollment" (2008, p. 8).

[5] For example, one study (Bloom and Sommo, 2005) assesses outcomes for students who participate in designated learning communities as freshmen, finding that "students substantially outperformed control group students during their first semester" and that "one year after enrollment, [these] students were more likely to have completed their remedial English requirements" (p. iii). A researcher who looked at outcomes across several studies found similar results that clustered around three areas: 1) Participants in learning communities get the same or better grades than students in stand-alone courses; 2) They have higher rates of retention, especially at community colleges; and 3) The learning community experience "was inherently better than what [students] had experienced in stand-alone courses" (Price and Lee, 2005, p. 15).

[6] According to the official description, "Springboard to Transfer is a three-semester learning community for students who want to transfer to a four-year institution. Each semester, students take one English course and one general education course, and these courses are linked together by a shared book. In the first semester, students also receive targeted transfer-planning support from Chabot counselors." http://www.chabotcollege.edu/Springboard.

[7] SPECC faculty participant Katie Hern has written on this subject as part of her own inquiry. See Hern (2007a and 2007b) for further information about her work.

[8] Laney College is one of the SPECC campuses. Smokey Wilson's path-breaking work there had helped create a friendly climate for inquiry and innovation in developmental education. Wilson herself attended at least one SPECC event, but she had already retired from active teaching and was not officially part of Laney's SPECC team.

[9] In fact, many of these students would be excellent resources for justifying new programs or courses to campus leadership. One of the things we asked them was what they would like to tell their campus president about their experiences. They had lots to say!

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