

## PROMISING PRACTICE

# Implementing Contextualization Into the Integrated Reading and Writing (IRW) Classroom: Making IRW “Worth it”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The importance of contextualization within postsecondary contexts has been embraced by the state of Texas, as shown by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) Accelerate Texas Initiative (THECB, n.d.). Contextualization, in short, is the teaching and development of basic skills and knowledge within a specific disciplinary topic (Perin, 2011). Perin (2011) claims that transfer of learning theories and learner motivation theories suggest that contextualization is one means of improving instructional methods within the postsecondary context. According to the THECB (2016), Accelerate Texas programs are designed to integrate or contextualize basic reading, math, and writing skills with workforce training, providing students with opportunities for college transition and entry into high demand occupations. The Education Institute (TEI), a grant-funded center within the College of Education at Texas State University, has provided educators with contextualized professional development modules that can be utilized in a variety of postsecondary courses.

### Contextualization in Developmental Education Contexts

TEI created a module specifically addressing the need for contextualization within postsecondary courses that is easily applicable and adaptable for Integrated Reading and Writing (IRW) courses. This particular module, The Self-Change Power Project, was adapted from *Academic Transformation: The Road to College Success*, and it can help students monitor their progress towards reaching behavioral goals (Sellers et al., 2015). The Self-Change Power Project was originally intended to help students enrolled in student success courses document and track behaviors regarding time man-

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agement, mindfulness, wellness, and study habits (Sellers et al., 2015). However, TEI adapted the Self-Change Power Project to focus on work-related behaviors for students enrolled in developmental education courses. This contextualized approach allows for an opportunity for students to brainstorm, practice, and reflect on requisite behaviors for future employment.

### Contextualization and IRW

Perin (2011) emphasized how contextualization can increase students' "mastery of basic skills as well as the likelihood of transfer of basic skills to content courses that are not occurring in traditional, decontextualized learning environments" (p. 286). According to Perin, contextualization can increase students' intrinsic motivation and level of engagement in the classroom because it allows the subject to be deemed useful and interesting to learners. After reading Perin's work, the authors of this article were reminded of the seminal text on IRW by Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), where they argued that IRW courses should not only be a study skills course consisting of workbooks and diagramming sentences, but IRW should help students acquire the necessary literacies to be successful in both academic and workplace discourses.

After making the connection between Perin's (2011) work on contextualization and Bartholomae's and Petrosky's (1986) theory on IRW, the authors of this article, who also teach IRW and research developmental education populations, decided to modify the Self-Change Power Project to help students achieve the learning objectives for the expository unit of the semester titled the Discourse Community Analysis (DCA). It is common for IRW instructors to assign an expository unit centered around the students' future careers; however, it is critical to also provide the opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with their future careers in a way that transcends a basic description of their potential professions (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986).

### Process for Implementing Contextualization Into IRW

Since IRW is a reading and writing course, the expository unit can be utilized to help students understand the various literacies in their chosen fields of study. Ideally, the students complete a 6-week DCA project where they not only research the many facets of communication within their

potential careers, but they also observe and participate within these communities. Following their research, observations, and reflections on their participation with their selected community, the students must present through either traditional essay format or by a formal presentation to the class, the goals, types of communication, language, membership, and the significance of literacy within their chosen community (Wardle & Downs, 2011). Three questions originally guided the expository unit to make IRW *worth it*:

- Does assigning a DCA on students' future careers lead to students having a stronger understanding of academic and workplace literacies?
- Does implementing a comprehensive project that focuses on students' individual goals increase motivation for students to complete the IRW course?

Students  
participate in  
their selected  
communities  
and keep  
a journal  
about their  
experiences.

- Could an alternative version of the Self-Change Power Project accomplish these goals?

The following is a brief timeline of activities leading up to the final product for the DCA project:

- Students brainstorm and research types of communication, language, behaviors, and various literacies of their future careers.
- Students decide what types of communication, language, behaviors, and various literacies of their future careers they want to observe, participate in, and monitor for 4–5 weeks.
- Students participate in their selected communities and keep a journal about their experiences. They are prompted to write about what they observed, how they participated within the communi-

ty, and how literacy is an integral aspect of their community.

- In the last week of the unit, students showcase through writing, class discussion, and photographic evidence their processes and experiences participating in their chosen communities.
- Students submit their completed DCA project for a grade via essay or in-class presentation.

The project timeline was derived from combining components of the Self-Change Power Project guidelines (The Education Institute, 2016), IRW best practices (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986), and Wardle and Down's (2011) work on integrating students' discourse communities into post-secondary writing classrooms.

### Findings and Discussion

The DCA project aligns with what Goen and Gillotte-Tropp (2003) referred to as the six principles of an IRW program: integration, time, development, academic membership, sophistication, and purposeful communication. Based on feedback from two sections of IRW, the authors of this article received an overwhelming amount of positive responses from students who completed the DCA project. Students stated that the project helped them decide if their selected major was the right path for them, the act of observing, understanding, and researching their communities forced students to use a variety of skills and resources they had not yet used in college, and finally, students reported that it made them see the benefits to taking an IRW course. Based on the students' responses, implementing contextualization into the IRW classroom allows students to integrate literacies from other aspects of their lives into the IRW classroom. The project also encourages students to be an active member of academia through the extensive research process necessary to complete the DCA. Finally, students complete this project with the skills and knowledge needed to not only purposefully communicate in the classroom, but they are familiar with the different literacies and communicative acts within their future professions.

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