On the Developmental Education Radar Screen – 2013

By Eric J. Paulson

This is the second iteration of the Developmental Education Radar Screen project. As with the first iteration, in 2011, I use a "radar screen" metaphor to discuss trends in developmental education based on responses provided by a group of leaders in the field to a series of topics and categories. And these are interesting times indeed, to be asking about trends in the field of developmental education. With unprecedented levels of attention paid to the field—both within academia and in the mainstream media—developmental educators find themselves in the public eye as never before. Some of the attention has played out in negative ways and other aspects of the attention have allowed the field to promote what it has traditionally excelled at: providing access and support to those students who are the most precariously positioned in higher education. And of course, most professionals in the field believe these are excellent opportunities to critically examine the field and push for change in key areas. The purpose of "On the Developmental Education Radar Screen" is to provide a snapshot of the current and developing trends in the field and to focus attention on relevant topics in developmental education.

Through a structured survey interview, a group of experts made judgments about topics in developmental education: whether a topic was On the Developmental Education Radar Screen or Off the Developmental Education Radar Screen, and whether that topic Should Be On the Developmental Education Radar Screen or Should Be Off the Developmental Education Radar Screen. There were 45 topics in the survey, each one a word or phrase, in four categories: Pedagogy, Perspectives & Lenses, Contexts & Populations, and Inquiry. Respondents were asked to "consider whether a given topic is currently on the 'radar screen' of the developmental education field and whether you think it should be on the radar screen or should not be. In other words, is the topic currently receiving attention? And do you think it should be receiving that attention or not?" Those responses, and others, were then considered with a discussion group at the College Reading and Learning Association's national conference. The names of both the expert respondents and the discussion group participants are noted at the end of the column. Topics were chosen based on their prevalence in developmental-education literature and further refined based on respondents' feedback and shifts in the field. (See the first iteration of the Radar Screen in *JDE* Volume 35, Issue 2, 2011, for a more complete description of the overall process and reference to the "what's hot, what's not" literacy project it is modeled after.)

For a snapshot of the results of this iteration of the project, see Table 1 at the end of this essay.

Trends

First, some changes since the last iteration of the Radar Screen. *Basic Writing* went from unanimous agreement that it Should Be On the Radar Screen to a solid number saying it Should Be Off the Radar Screen, and *Developmental Reading* similarly dropped from its previous position of unanimous agreement that it Should Be On the Radar Screen. Most other areas that changed moved toward On, rather than Off, as measured by respondents' understandings of the field's current foci. *Self-efficacy* still rated as being Off the Radar Screen by a majority of the respondents, but all of the respondents noted that it Should Be On the Radar Screen. Another change from the previous iteration of the Radar Screen survey is the unanimous scoring of Should Be On the Radar Screen for theory and several types of research: *Evaluation*, *Institution-level*, *Mixed-method*, and *Quantitative*. This may be related to the increased focus on research-based outcomes being widely discussed in the field.

In many areas, changes from the previous iteration of the survey took the form of more agreement among respondents in terms of some key areas. *Assessment* now has unanimous agreement that it is both On and Should Be On the Radar Screen. This increase was also seen with the topic *Community Colleges*; in fact, along with *Developmental Mathematics*, *Community Colleges* as a focus for the field was assessed as both being On and Should Be On the Radar Screen by all of the respondents. That is, in those key areas of alignment: what the field should be focusing on, it is focusing on. Other topics do not enjoy such alignment. For example, although *Strategy Instruction* is viewed as Should Be On the Radar Screen it is also rated as currently being Off the Radar Screen. A focus on *Cultural/Linguistic Issues*, *Instructor Certification*, and several aspects of inquiry (e.g., *Teacher Research* and *Theory*) follow the same pattern. In other words, there are issues in the field that need more attention than they are currently receiving.

Integrated Reading & Writing (*IRW*) is new to this iteration and has entered the discussion in dramatic fashion. A majority of respondents noted that it is On the Radar Screen presently, and all of the respondents agreed that it Should Be On the Radar Screen. *IRW* is a holistic approach to literacy education that acknowledges the interconnected nature of reading and writing processes, and seeks to make those connections explicit for instructional purposes. This is not necessarily a new idea; not only is there research focused on the interaction of reading and writing that dates back decades, there are also pedagogically-oriented materials that have promoted integrated approaches to reading and writing for a similar time period. What is new now may be the state-level adoption of *IRW* as an alternative to separate developmental reading and basic writing courses. Virginia and Texas, for example, are in advanced stages of mandating *IRW* for certain levels of their developmental sequence in colleges across those states, and other states are beginning or considering similar mandates.

In addition to the ranking of the 45 set topics, respondents also had the opportunity to answer more open-ended questions. This provided for more contextualization of the responses and allowed respondents to provide other information they thought pertinent to the radar screen focus.

One of these questions centered on who should be directly involved with decision-making and setting the agenda for the field. Several respondents noted the need for the field's professional associations to be at the forefront of decision making. They also noted that professionals in the field should take an active role; however, those professionals need to be steeped in theory and research. Collaborations were noted as being important but with the caveat that they need to include those who are in the field as well as policy-makers. In addition, there was a reaction against efforts by those who are not in the field of developmental education making policy recommendations. In some cases this was presented as an outsiders-versus-insiders issue, but the majority of responses indicated the need to have more than one perspective at the table. The list of stakeholders presented was fairly comprehensive, and

included graduate students, instructors, researchers from within the field as well as researchers from other fields, administrators, state higher education leaders, and the field's professional associations.

Respondents also weighed in on what they believe are the most pressing issues in the field at present, and two main threads emerged. The first is that educators have work to do in optimizing success for students in DE. It is important to better utilize evaluation tools to determine the most effective curricula and support for students, so that success rates more accurately reflect students' potentials. The other thread involves the influence of outside agencies on the field in what are perceived as being negative ways. Respondents noted that some of those agencies have little knowledge and respect for the field and appear to be focused on singling out the developmental education field as the cause of what is not working in higher education in general. Others are concerned about the policies that have been put forth from nondevelopmental education groups that would dramatically decrease opportunities for access to, and success in, higher education for economically disadvantaged students and other historically excluded groups. A core criticism here is that there are claims being made about a lack of effectiveness of developmental education beyond what available data warrant.

Wrapping Up

This iteration of the Radar Screen project has seen a dip in the scores of Should Be On the Radar Screen for both *Basic Writing* and *Developmental Reading*. Yet at the same time, *Integrated Reading and Writing* appeared with a unanimous rating in that same category of what Should Be On the Radar Screen. Basic writing and developmental reading as instructional foci have a long history in our field, and it may be too soon to note the changes the survey reveals as emblematic of a larger movement toward an approach that integrates the two. Yet, holistic, process-oriented, social/discursive understandings strongly inhabit both the reading and the writing fields, and integrated reading and writing as a

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Table 1

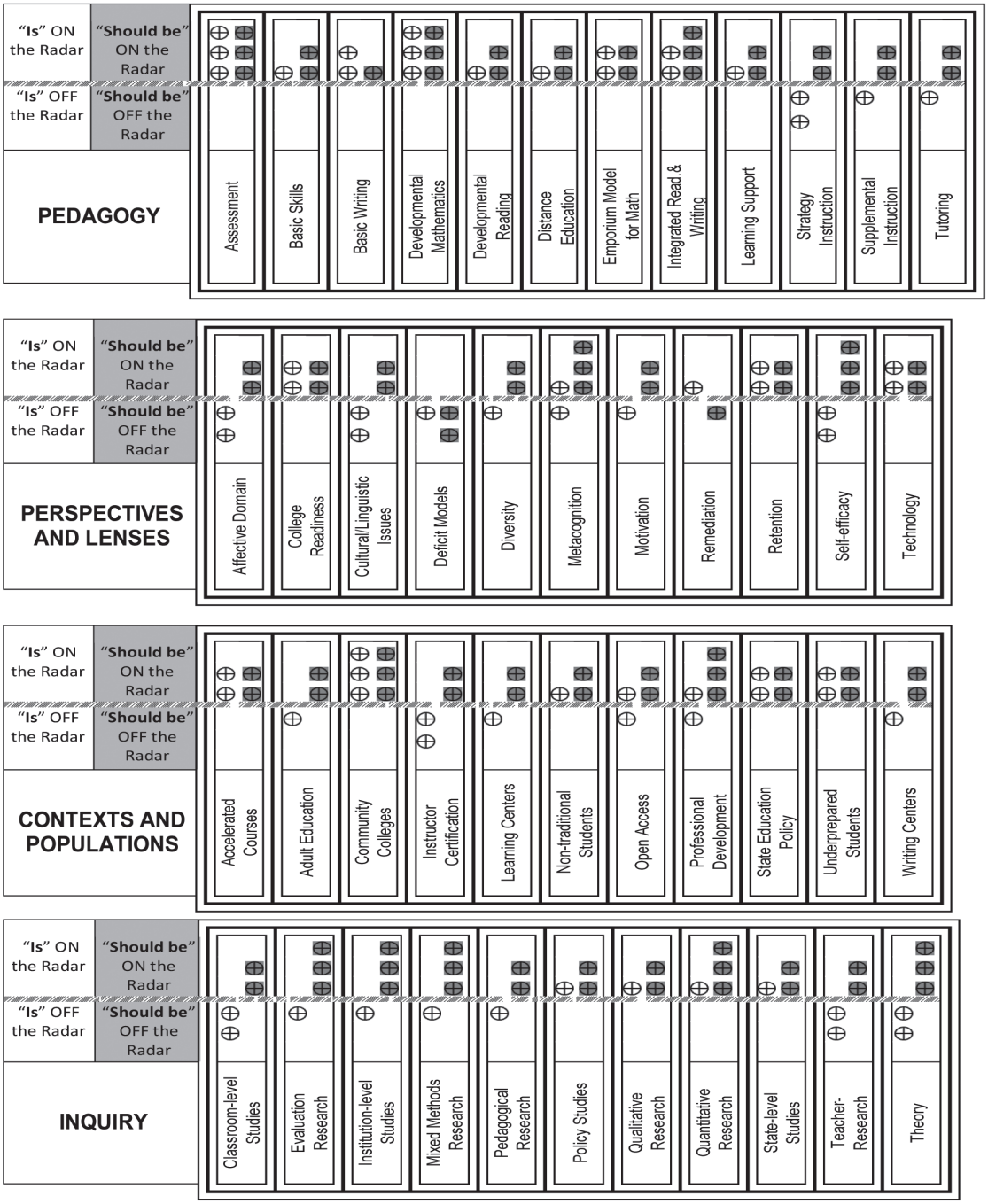
2013 Radar Screen Category and Topic Results

How to read the table: Each Radar Screen topic (*Assessment, Learning Centers,* etc.) has four quadrants that correspond to the four decision areas in the survey: is ON the radar screen (not shaded), SHOULD BE ON the radar screen (shaded), is OFF the radar screen (not shaded), SHOULD BE OFF the radar screen (shaded):

⊕ One radar symbol indicates that at least 50% of the respondents were in agreement

⊕⊕ Two radar symbols indicate that at least 75% of the respondents were in agreement

⊕⊕⊕ Three radar symbols indicate that all the respondents were in agreement



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construct may be seen as a natural outgrowth of those understandings. It will be interesting to see whether those trends, and others that are implicit in the responses presented here, continue on that trajectory or chart a new course altogether.

2013 Expert Respondents (alphabetical): Karen S. Agee, University of Northern Iowa; David Arendale, University of Minnesota; Sonya L. Armstrong, Northern Illinois University; Hunter R. Boylan, NCDE Appalachian State University; Barbara J. Calderwood, NCDE Appalachian State University; Martha Casazza, TRPP Associates; David C. Caverly, Texas State University; Negar Farakish, Union County College; Rebecca Goosen, San Jacinto College; Rosemary M. Karr, Collin College; Jane McGrath, Paradise Valley Community College; Geraldine L. McBroom, Central New Mexico Community College; Jane Neuburger, Syracuse University; Dolores Perin, CCRC Columbia University; D. Patrick Saxon, Sam Houston State University; Norman Stahl, Northern Illinois University; Uri Treisman, University of Texas at Austin; Linda Thompson, Harding University; Dominic J. Voge, Princeton University; Ann Wolf, Cengage Learning.

CRLA Discussion Group (alphabetical): Kristin Black, Truman College; Barb Freitas, Mohave Community College; Cynthia Jenkins, St. Louis Community College; Ariela Lange, Odessa College; Elissa Medina-Bancroft, Howard College; Joey Roberts, Howard College; Nancy Schafer, Yavapai College; Thresa Stallings, New Mexico State University; Pamela Womack, Lone Star College

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Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) in Cleveland Ohio has also recently developed an open access online course in mathematics using course lecture material developed by faculty along with open source material. The are marketing the course to local high schools and students as a means to improve math skills if the students are planning to attend the college.

The approach at both Bossier Parish and Tri-C is to present material in a "low-risk failure environment" (Fain, 2013, para. 20) following a self-paced, competency-based, game-style model using levels. Tri-C requires an 80% mastery of compentencies to pass the noncredit course; Bossier Parish is tracking how the MOOC-style courses impact student placement. The school anticipates an increase in the number of students placing out of developmental education and directly into credit bearing courses.

Evaluation Efforts

A new research project—the MOOC Research Initiative—is poised to assist evaluation efforts. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the initiative has offered grants of $10,000-$25,000 to investigate the effect of MOOCs at the systemic level as well as on individual students. According to George Siemens, of the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, researchers "want to move past the hype and start looking at the actual research around open online courses" (Grossman, 2013b, para. 3). Grant proposals were accepted from June 5 through July 7th and a conference is scheduled for December 2013 to share initial findings; final results are to be released early in 2014. This admittedly aggressive timeline is necessary, says Siemens, due to the need to produce and distribute evidence as quickly as possible regarding the rapidly expanding adoption of MOOCs and their impact.

Conclusion

Professionals in postsecondary developmental education and learning assistance should follow applications of massive open online courses in the field as well as research regarding their effectiveness. Underprepared students have already been identified as a target audience; professionals in the field should contribute to the conversation, be included in curriculum development for this audience, and closely watch and participate in evaluation efforts in order to ride the wave rather than be pulled under by the current.

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