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Christy M. Howard

East Carolina University, howardch14@ecu.edu

Lanette Moret

East Carolina University, moretl@ecu.edu

Johna Faulconer

East Carolina University, faulconerj@ecu.edu

Tanya Cannon

East Carolina University, cannonta@ecu.edu

Amanda Tomlin

Prince William County Public School System, tomlina@pwcs.edu

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Preparing for College Success: Exploring Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of the Benefits of a College Reading and Study Skills Course through Action Research

Christy M. Howard - East Carolina University

Lanette Moret - East Carolina University

Johna Faulconer - East Carolina University

Tanya Cannon - East Carolina University

Amanda Tomlin - Prince William County Public School System

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate students' perceptions of the benefits of a college reading and study skills course. Researchers have found that even with increased emphasis on college readiness, many students continue to enter college unprepared for the rigorous academic expectations they may face. With this in mind, this study was designed to examine the perceptions of students entering college and being enrolled in a "support" course based on their SAT scores. Findings revealed that participants valued learning study skills and strategies that supported their understanding of course material before, during, and after the reading process. In addition, participants valued strategies that would transfer across courses in the university setting. This action research study provides the opportunity to consider how instructors can support students' experiences in support courses through resources and strategies to support student success in college and beyond.

Key words: college readiness, study skills, strategies, transfer of knowledge

Introduction

Preparing students to be "college ready" has long been a goal of K-12 teachers. This focus has been amplified in recent years with college and career standards (CCSS, 2010) being adopted by most states throughout the country. Even with this emphasis on college readiness, standardized test data shows many students still enter college unprepared (ACT, Inc., 2012; Gross, Hochbein, & Royster, 2015; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2013). Achieve (2009) states that being ready for college means "a high school graduate has the

knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses without the need for remedial coursework.” Based on this assertion, not only do students need a combination of knowledge and skills, they also need to be able to transfer knowledge and skills across content areas.

However, data shows this is not the case. The ACT test, which is a national college admissions exam assessing students in math, science, reading and English revealed that the class of 2011 seniors only had 25% of students demonstrate college readiness in all four subject areas (ACT, 2011).

In considering these findings on college readiness, this study seeks to examine participants’ perspectives in a course designed to support students upon entering college. This course is designed to supply students with the necessary reading and study skills by providing strategies that can transfer across content areas in order to promote college level success. Specifically this study seeks to determine, *what are students’ perceptions of the benefits of a college reading and study skills course?*

Review of the Literature

Study Skills and Success

Study skills are competencies in acquiring, recording, organizing, synthesizing, remembering, and using information and ideas (Harvey, 1995). Research shows students without sound study skills are not prepared for college success (Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Reaser, & Petscher, 2006). In Al-Hilawani’s (2016) study of students’ metacognition and study skills, data revealed that students’ study skills were related to academic performance and grade point averages. With this in mind, Al-Hilawani (2016) suggested study skills “help

students during the learning process to acquire, retain, and produce the new information,” (p. 75). This supports the notion that the acquisition and use of study skills can support students throughout their schooling.

While there is limited research related to study skills courses at the university level, the courses that focus on study skills are important resources for students. Not only do these courses ease the transition to college, but they also allow students opportunities to evaluate and develop note-taking, test-taking, and time management skills (Loew, 1998). Many colleges and universities have incorporated a study skills course, which may also be known as freshman seminar, or college survival course. The importance of these courses should go beyond *understanding* how to use strategies, but also how to *apply* them across other college courses in order to gain knowledge across subject areas.

Transfer of Knowledge

While study skills are important to student success, it is equally important that students can transfer these skills across content areas. The goal of transfer is an important factor in teaching college level support courses. In *How People Learn* from the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (2000) transfer is discussed as

The ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts. Educators hope that students will transfer learning from one problem to another within a course, from one year in school to another, between school and home, and from school to workplace (p.51).

This discussion from the Commission highlights the idea that teaching students to transfer knowledge should go beyond extending their learning in a particular

course to include an understanding of how that knowledge is related to other courses, and even beyond the classroom. This assertion is supported by Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2010) who state that in preparing students for college, it is important to ensure they are prepared to access, retrieve, integrate, interpret reflect and evaluate a variety of texts. This reinforces the idea that across content areas students should be able to transfer knowledge that will allow them to engage with texts in meaningful ways and support them in accessing and applying new knowledge.

In Johnson and Rutherford's (2010) study of education majors, their goal was to determine if students were able to transfer knowledge from their chemistry course into solving other science problems. Findings revealed that students did not find success with these tasks because there was no effort on the part of the instructors to connect courses or connect prior knowledge. Researchers suggest students may be better equipped to transfer knowledge when instructors encourage these connections and present information in ways that show the role of information across different contexts (Lobato, 2003; Salomon & Perkins, 1989).

When content is presented only in a single context, transfer becomes difficult, therefore it is important to help students understand content across multiple contexts (Bjork & Richardson-Klavhen, 1989; Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). When students are able to transfer knowledge this showcases that true learning has occurred. In a course that teaches important study skills and strategies this knowledge becomes even more valuable as it is transferred across content areas to support student learning.

Methods

The researchers used an action research approach for this study. Action research serves to help teachers reflect on their teaching and consider how they might improve their practices (Dana, 2013, Mertler, 2014). For the purpose of this study we draw on the work of Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) in defining action research as a systematic inquiry process conducted by teachers. This approach was chosen for this study because in reflecting on previous semesters as instructors, we questioned the benefits of the course and how students perceived the course. In scheduled meetings to discuss the course, we noted the fact that many students often skipped class and turned in subpar assignments. In recognizing the course had not been revised in many years we brainstormed ways to update the course making it more relevant to 21st century students.

We took the course through the revision process at the university, adopting new textbooks, shifting from a focus on traditional print literacy to a broader definition of texts that students might see across their courses, and revising the course objectives to more closely align with literacy standards and expectations that would better serve the students across content areas. We wanted students to see the revised course as a resource with clear connections to their other courses. Once the course went through initial revisions, we decided to conduct an action research project that would help us better understand the components of the course the students found beneficial and consider further adjustments. For this study, reflection pieces were added to the course in order to amplify the voices of students and to determine if further modifications were needed.

Participants and Context

Participants in this study were purposefully selected, as they were all students in an undergraduate program at a southeastern United States university. Participants were enrolled in a course designed for students who may have difficulty with reading and writing skills upon entering college. Students were placed in this course based on their SAT scores. The goal of the course was to provide reading and study strategies that could be applied across other college level classes and beyond. All 188 students enrolled in all sections of the course were invited to participate in the study. Of those enrolled, 151 students agreed to participate in at least one survey.

Data Collection

Students were asked to participate in an anonymous survey consisting of 16 questions at the beginning of the course, in the middle of the course and at the conclusion of the course. Ten of the questions were multiple choice, asking students to rate their college preparedness and specific reading and study skills. The remaining six questions were opened-ended and focused on specific reading, memory, and study strategies. This paper, which is part of a larger study, focuses on student responses to question 14, *do you feel that this course, which aims to support and improve your reading comprehension skills and study skills is helpful/beneficial? Why or why not?* The focus on this question allowed the researchers to address the research question, in determining specific student perceptions of the course. This article represents survey data from the final survey, which consisted of 66 participants.

Additionally, in an effort to further explore the research question, students were given reflection questions throughout each lesson module in the semester. The questions asked students to reflect on their learning experiences and specific strategies they might use from the course. Analyzing these reflections served as an additional data source for determining student perceptions.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, each researcher, using open coding, individually analyzed data collected from all student surveys highlighting “significant statements, sentences or quotes” (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 255) that provided an understanding of how participants experienced the benefits of being in a reading and study skills support course.

Following this initial coding phase, we collaborated to compare and discuss participant responses, examining the commonalities of the perceived benefits of the course. Eight initial categories emerged from this analysis phase, related to the topics taught in the course such as time management, comprehension, note-taking, etc. From here the survey data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), identifying similar categories across surveys and student reflection questions. This analysis phase helped to identify common statements across the data sources and helped the researchers to reduce, display and draw conclusions from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). From here data was sorted and coded into two themes, which allowed for a better understanding of participants’ perceptions of the course and would serve to provide a description of the “essence of the experiences for all the individuals” (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 252).

Findings

Final survey results revealed that 95% of the participants found the course to be beneficial. The emerging themes from the survey and reflections representing student perceptions of these benefits included 1) embracing study skills and strategies as a tool for success 2) valuing transfer of knowledge across content areas. These themes are further discussed below.

Embracing Study Skills and Strategies as a Tool for Success

Survey data across all sections of the course revealed that the course was most beneficial to participants in supporting them with study skills and strategies. In the final survey, 45% of participants discussed study skills and strategies as being beneficial. With the next two closest topics being test taking and time management with 25% and 15% respectively. In student responses, data revealed that study skills were valued by participants because they not only helped students *organize* information across courses, but these skills also helped students to better *comprehend* the content of their other courses, as one student shared, “This class has taught me different studying techniques to help me understand the material better.”

Throughout the course, students engaged in learning study skills and strategies to help support their understanding of material before, during and after reading such as questioning strategies, which participants discussed as helping them to create questions as a guide to their reading and better comprehend various texts. One student asserted, “This course is exposing me to different ways to study, organize, take notes, etc. and it is helpful.” Participants also learned how to use summary charts and idea maps which they cited as

helping them to visualize, make connections, and focus on major ideas within texts across content areas such as psychology, science and art. These strategies provided opportunities for students to engage in skills that would help them find success across courses, which is further explored in the discussion of transfer of knowledge.

As noted in the data analysis, the majority of students reflected on the benefits of study skills and strategies learned in the course. As students participated in interest inventories and responded to surveys and reflection prompts, they came to better understand themselves as learners. “I am starting to realize that I need to improve on my study skills and my reading comprehension skills. If I had not been placed in this class some things about myself would not have been brought to light.”

Participants saw a need to improve their study skills and the survey data affirmed this need was met with study skills being ranked the number one benefit of the course. As one student cited, “It helped bring new study and test taking skills to the table on top of what I already knew, and it helped me as the semester progressed.” These skills continued to help students throughout the semester and to transfer these skills across other courses.

Transfer of Knowledge across a Range of Content Areas

How People Learn from the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (2000) stated, “Transfer can be improved by helping students become more aware of themselves as learners who actively monitor their learning strategies and resources” (p. 67). Therefore, as students examined themselves as learners in the process of transferring knowledge in this course,

they were able to access their areas of weaknesses and use study skills and strategies to address these weaknesses. One student shared,

Something I could do to better understand what I read is change my attitude toward the text. I have never really liked reading, and I usually start reading with the “I don’t want to do this attitude” I also need to identify my purpose. There’s a reason I am reading what I am reading and I need to understand that. When I realize my purpose for reading it will help me comprehend the text better because I will have a reason to read it.

If as educators, we are to improve transfer of knowledge across courses, giving students the opportunity to examine themselves as learners is important in the process. Through reflection, students are able to understand the challenges they face as learners and how they must overcome these challenges in order to be able to transfer these study skills and strategies to other courses. In this study, self-reflection benefits were also exhibited throughout the survey and reflection data with one student sharing, “This course allows me to learn new ways to study so that I am able to understand the course material for *each* of my classes better.” This student response revealed that study strategies were not an isolated learning process, but as students self-monitored their learning, they realized there was a transfer of this knowledge where these strategies helped them comprehend material in other courses.

Additionally, a participant expanded on how this knowledge is not only helpful with current courses, but perhaps throughout college as well, “This course is helpful because it teaches me many different strategies while taking tests, taking notes, and studying better. It helps me in gaining more skills while reading

or studying for other subjects and helps me to be more successful in my college career.”

An example of this transfer of knowledge to other subjects is showcased in the reflection question posed to participants, which asked students to reflect on their learning experiences, and specific strategies they plan to use from the course. In response to the prompt, participants reflected on struggles they were having in math, science, international studies, art, sociology, etc. Students felt confident enough in the strategies they learned to implement them across content areas. Several students recognized and valued the importance of creating their own study guides for other courses.

I would like to improve in my criminal justice class.... One strategy to help me understand what I read/learn for this course is to create a study guide for myself to know that I understand the topic. Some points I need to remember are answer questions, paraphrase key ideas, add details and explanations ... The best study guide for me to use is study cards because there are a lot of terms and definitions in the criminal justice system. This strategy can support my understanding for the course content because putting a term or idea in a question format will help me focus on what I need to know.

Through the learning process, participants in this study recognized the importance of taking ownership of their learning, and beyond expecting teachers to provide study guides, they learned that they could meet their specific learning needs in content area courses by creating their own study guides. “I need to improve my study skills in Microeconomics. I will create study guides that will

answer questions, provide examples, and detailed explanation... This will help my understanding of Econ because my notes will be more in order.” Participants understood the benefits of creating these guides in that they not only helped with content knowledge, but they also helped with organization of the information across their classes. Additionally, as evidenced in the quote below, participants discussed the importance of creating questions within their study guides in order to better understand the knowledge in context and prepare them for assessments.

One course I would like to improve in is Dynamic Earth. Science courses have never come off easy to me. Therefore I have to study a lot to attain all the information... In this course, we do not receive a study guide or any direct source for studying, so I feel creating these questions will act as a study guide. This strategy will allow me to view the information in context that could potentially be similar to questions that will be on the test.

Study skills and strategies shared with students in this course allowed them to understand the importance of examining their needs, resources and learning goals in order to gain access to knowledge in other courses. These skills and strategies were used as tools for accessing a range of information across content areas.

Discussion

It is important that students enter college prepared for the expectations of learning across all content areas without the need for remedial courses. However, when this does not occur, college support courses can be beneficial. With courses like this in place, an important factor to consider is the intentional promotion of transfer of knowledge. Instructors must help students make these connections in

their learning (Johnson & Rutherford, 2010; Lobato, 2003; Salomon & Perkins, 1989). It is not enough to present skills and strategies, but students must be taught to make the connections to new information (Gallagher, 2000). Gallagher (2010) asserts, “unless connections are made evident to students, many will not identify them” (p. 312). In the current study, these connections were made evident as students were taught new skills and strategies they were asked to reflect on how they would use them in current and future classes. Students responded with how the strategies had already benefited them in current classes with note taking and creating reading and study guides. In addition, they discussed the benefits of these strategies across specific content areas such as math, science, art etc.

This intentional discussion of transfer with students has implications for self-reflection as a springboard for helping students to transfer knowledge across content areas. This reflection was an intentional step in helping students “link the courses together”, which is important in the role of transfer (Johnson & Rutherford, 2010, p. 88). Throughout this study, the opportunity to self-reflect on learning was important to participants as they worked to understand their needs as learners. It was also important to the transfer of knowledge as they considered how their needs and the skills and strategies they learned could impact their success in other courses. Activities in class such as survey questions and reflections provided students with a starting point to reflect on themselves as learners. Through these reflection opportunities students were asked to evaluate themselves as readers and consider the skills and strategies they found useful. When discussing the benefits of the course, students had the opportunity to

reflect on their needs as learners bringing to the forefront issues such as, “I have trouble absorbing information when reading something I don’t find interesting” or “I think I am poor at comprehension.” These self-reflections helped students consider their personal needs and how they might take new knowledge and transfer it to other courses.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides clear examples of students finding support in study skills courses and reveals positive responses of participants, there were limitations of this study including the small representation of students at one university during one semester. In addition, in the final survey only 44% of the total participants responded. It is difficult to know if the 56% of participants who did not complete the final survey would have had similar or different perceptions of the course. Future research should include longitudinal studies that follow participants across semesters and should have protocols in place to promote equal participation throughout the duration of the project.

An emerging theme of this study showed that students were able to transfer knowledge gained in this course to other courses. This study focuses on broad meanings of transfer of learning as described by the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (2000). Future research could focus on more specific meanings and examples of transfer of knowledge to include a more specific analysis of transfer through motivation and dispositions (Perkins & Salomon, 2012). Despite these limitations, considering the limited research available on this topic, this study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the specific experiences and reflections of university participants in

student support courses, amplifying the voices of students throughout their learning journey. These findings may serve to support other programs that serve students entering college unprepared for the rigor and expectations of college level courses.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this action research study, we understand that student perceptions of learning are important in the work of instructors. This knowledge provides personal insight into the academic needs and expectations of students. Findings revealed that through self-reflection, students were able to consider their learning needs in choosing strategies they would transfer to find success across content area college courses. As this course continues to be revised we will continue to include these opportunities for reflection that were provided by this study. In addition, we will continue to actively seek strategies to engage students in the learning process in ways that will transfer across courses.

While 95% of students responding found the course to be beneficial, 5% did not. Those participants cited wanting to focus more on reading comprehension and more hands-on resources. In response to this feedback from the study, the following semester the course instructor teaching all sections of the course made revisions to include reading discussion groups, cooperative learning, foldables as study resources and additional opportunities to reflect through journaling. Through discussions and reflecting on the study data, these modifications were made in an effort to reach other students who may have had a desire for a more hands-on approach to learning.

With the number of students entering college unprepared for the level of reading and writing required (ACT, Inc., 2012; Gross, Hochbein, & Royster, 2015) this study showed us the importance of not only focusing on specific skills and strategies, but in being explicit about how these skills and strategies can support learning across courses. As teachers of study skills courses work to provide instruction to meet the needs of students in these courses, it is important to note the intentional connections that must be made. Asking students to reflect on their learning and to reflect on how the learning transfers to other courses can support these connections. While researchers show students without sound study skills are not prepared for success in college (Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Reaser, & Petscher, 2006), it is not enough to have these skills, but students must be taught to understand how these skills and strategies transfer to their specific experiences and their specific classes. This can be accomplished through reflective surveys, discussions, journaling, etc. Valuing the voices and perceptions of students as they examine the experiences that work well for them in such courses can serve to create a framework for engaging and supporting student learning.

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