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*Self-Selected
Reading for
Enjoyment
as a College
Developmental
Reading
Approach*

The field of college developmental reading does not have a unified, agreed-upon approach to creating effective and efficient readers at the college level, as Reynolds and Werner (2003) have pointed out. For example, Keefe and Meyer (1991) assert the appropriateness of a holistic, whole-language approach for adult readers, while Bohr (2003) maintained that a constructivist approach can confuse college readers. Despite college developmental educators calling for learner-centered approaches like reader response (e.g., Chamblee, 2003), a direct instruction, skills-based approach has a solid foothold in college developmental reading programs. The influence of the latter is evident in even the most cursory glance at many college reading textbooks, which show a focus on word-level skill building, with exercises that emphasize analyzing the roots of words and defining and memorizing vocabulary items. When text excerpts longer than a paragraph are provided in these textbooks, they are often followed by discrete point questions about factual, objective aspects of the text. If we accept that to an extent, textbooks reflect the type of teaching going on in the classroom (Wood, 2003), then college developmental reading practice is often typified by a focus on word-attack strategies and discrete-skill building. In addition, college developmental reading is often seen as consisting of content-area textbook reading and study assistance—a way to “get students through” their other college courses. In some contexts, a focus on skill building can be beneficial for many aspects of students’ academic lives given an appropriate metacognitive, strategy-construction approach. However, I propose that if we identify an important goal of developmental reading programs for college readers as providing a foundation for life-long

reading, a study-skills approach to college developmental reading falls short. Instead, we must focus on encouraging and instilling in developmental reading students the belief that reading has intrinsic value. It is through this approach that solid academic progress can be obtained as well.

The purpose of this article is to propose that encouraging *self-selected reading for enjoyment* by college developmental students is the key to generating both academic success and a love of reading. *Free voluntary reading* is a term coined by Krashen (2004) to describe “reading because you want to: no book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter” (p. 1). The term parallels others, such as *self-selected reading* (Cunningham, Hall, & Gambrell, 2002), *extensive reading* (Susser & Robb, 1990), *sustained silent reading* (McCraken, 1971), and more general descriptors like *pleasure reading* or *free reading*. *Self-selected reading for enjoyment*, shortened to SSRE for reasons of economy, will be the default term used here. A working definition of SSRE is reading for the sake of reading—fiction works independently chosen by college developmental readers to read for enjoyment or other intrinsically motivated reasons.

Concerns of reading educators about approaches that focus on and encourage holistic reading for the sake of reading understandably center around whether that approach can provide students with the vocabulary development and reading skills they need to succeed in college. The next section addresses how such an approach can be considered a viable part of a college developmental reading program.

Support for Self-Selected Reading For Enjoyment

Empirical Research on Self-Selected Reading

A curious, but fairly widespread, approach to developmental reading at many levels of education is that readers who are underperforming are given less opportunity to read authentic texts and instead given more drills and out-of-context instruction that involve little if any connected reading. In other words, poor readers get less reading and more worksheets, which only serves to increase the gap between good readers and poor readers (Allington, 1980; Krashen 2004). This trend toward giving troubled readers *less* authentic reading than their more proficient classmates is replicated in college developmental reading classes if the class is built around word analysis instead of being built around reading real texts. In fact, this bias toward explicit skill-and-drill instruction may be bolstered simply because of the lack of a tradition of SSRE approaches

in college developmental reading programs. However, evidence that a SSRE approach provides significant academic progress abounds from other populations of students, as the following two sections illustrate.

Self-selected reading and K–12 contexts. Krashen (2004) pointed out that K-12 students who were taught with free voluntary reading scored at least as well, if not better, on comprehension tests than students who were given traditional skills-based instruction: “in-school free reading programs are consistently effective. In 51 out of 54 comparisons (94 percent) readers do as well as or better than students who were engaged in traditional programs” (p. 2). There is a significant relationship between the amount of pleasure reading a student does and that student’s spelling performance (Stanovich & West, 1989), and the amount of recreational reading a student does is the best predictor of vocabulary, comprehension, and reading speed (Krashen, 2004). Krashen (2004) summed up the relationship between reading and academic progress:

Studies showing that reading enhances literacy development lead to what should be an uncontroversial conclusion: Reading is good for you. The research, however, supports a stronger conclusion: Reading is the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers (p. 37).

In short, studies of approaches that share SSRE principles at the K–12 level show self-selected reading for enjoyment to be crucial to academic success.

Self-selected reading and second-language contexts. In the second-language acquisition field, the approach to reading termed “extensive reading” entails students reading large amounts of fiction throughout the course of a semester and responding to it holistically, as opposed to “intensive reading” where students read shorter passages and answer comprehension and vocabulary questions (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Extensive reading approaches have been found to increase reading speed and comprehension (Bell, 2001), increase scores on standardized assessments (Hitosugi & Day, 2004), have a demonstrable positive effect on students’ writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989), build confidence in reading (Kembo, 1993), increase vocabulary (Day, Omura and Hiramatsu, 1991), and increase motivation to read (Constantino, 1994). Like the K–12 studies reviewed above, these studies of reading in a second or foreign language have shown the dramatic effects of utilizing SSRE-type approaches.

Findings from K–12 and second-language reading populations should be applicable to college developmental readers as well, as the following section describes.

Self-selected reading at the college level. Unfortunately, there is little empirical research on SSRE programs at the college level and any corresponding academic gains. The few studies that have explored the efficacy of a holistic, self-selected reading curriculum, however, show dynamic improvement in standardized reading assessment (Henry, 1995) and in interest and joy in reading (Valeri-Gold, 1995). For example, Henry (1995) had her students read their choice of fiction throughout the semester and write literary letters to each other and to the instructor about the books they were reading. In addition to students demonstrating and articulating an increased desire to read in general, they made a leap of 3.6 grade levels in the 15 weeks of the course, as measured by the Nelson-Denny reading assessment (from 8.6 pre-test to 12.2 post-test averages). A similar result occurred in a version of Henry's class piloted at the University of Cincinnati. Similar to Henry's course, students in the UC course read books of their choice supplied by the instructor, bought from bookstores and borrowed from public libraries, and wrote literary letters to each other and the instructor about their books and reading processes. These students also showed great improvement on a standardized test, in this case the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP). Their pre-test average on the DRP was 26.13 and their post-test average was 45.81 (out of a possible score of 70), a gain similar to that found in Henry's (1995) study, albeit on a different nationally used standardized assessment.

Though there have not as yet been large, replicated studies focused on self-selected reading at the college level, there is evidence to suggest that even by the most quantitative standardized assessment measures, a SSRE approach shows important reading ability gains by students. More research in this area is encouraged.

Evidence from programs in K-12 and second-language learning contexts show SSRE-type approaches to be a powerful intervention in terms of both increases in reading proficiency and intrinsic interest in reading in general. In addition, though there are few empirical studies focused on self-selected reading programs at the college level, the research that does exist shows similar benefits. This convergence of evidence suggests that incorporating a SSRE approach into a college developmental reading program can have powerful instructional implications for students' attitudes toward reading, reading proficiency, and overall academic progress.

Problem: Access to Books

With evidence like that presented above, most would agree that a project designed to encourage college developmental students to read self-se-

lected fiction for enjoyment on a regular basis is worthy, and that success in raising students' academic reading skills and general reading ability and confidence is likely. While step-by-step suggestions for a SSRE curriculum do not yet exist, Henry's (1995) book *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom* provides an engaging primer to such an approach. A key element in such a project, however, is access to books, as there is a positive correlation between access to books and reading ability (Krashen, 1995, 2004). Access in this sense means ability and tendency for students to easily obtain books—a public library a bus ride away seems accessible on paper, but in practical terms is not used as often as a source of books immediately accessible in, for example, the same building in which students attend classes. This is one reason that Elley's (1996) "book flood" programs, where the researcher provided numerous high interest books directly to students' classrooms, were so successful in generating patterns of extensive reading. In addition, in a multiple regression analysis that utilized data from 41 states in the U.S., Krashen (1995) found that significant predictors of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading comprehension test scores were the number of books per student in school libraries. These data point to a key element of extensive reading programs being the immediate accessibility of a variety of books for students to choose from.

The focus of this article concerns the importance of incorporating a SSRE approach in college developmental reading courses, and one important aspect of such an approach is encouraging reading above and beyond the class time frame. Because there is evidence that the longer a free voluntary reading program is run, the more effective it is (Krashen, 2004, p. 3), the more a college reading program can encourage and convince readers that reading for the sake of reading is intrinsically interesting and valuable, the more success those students will experience. To that end, a grant has recently been received at the University of Cincinnati to begin an on-site fiction lending library at the Center for Access and Transition, an open-access unit of the university that focuses on developmental education and underprepared readers. The make-up of the lending library will consist of high-interest fiction (novels, novellas, short stories, poetry, etc. from a wide variety of genre) which will alleviate the problem some of the university's students experience of limited access to books. One challenge will be to incorporate the lending library into curricula so that reading self-selected books for enjoyment eventually becomes part of the culture of the course of study at the Center.

Conclusion

Traditional college developmental reading approaches of word-attack

strategies and textbook study assistance have their place in assisting students with their immediate study needs, if this instruction takes place within a constructivist curriculum. But an element conspicuous in its absence from many college developmental reading programs is a focus on long-term development of these students as readers. As Henry (1995) pointed out, students in college developmental reading classes generally do not consider themselves readers and do not enjoy reading in most contexts. While traditional college developmental reading approaches help students improve some aspects of their study habits, there may be little or no change in their view of reading in general, and no change in their reading habits overall. Without changing students' views of themselves as readers and their reading habits, college developmental reading instructors may be contributing to students' views of reading as something unenjoyable that is done out of necessity from time to time, like changing the oil in a car. Without "reading for reading's sake," students are missing a vital element in their development as college students—students who read only what is necessary for class, and do not read for choice, usually do not improve as effective and efficient readers. Stanovich (1986) refers to this as the "Matthew Effect," a rich-get-richer perspective on reading development: the more you read, the better a reader you become. This effect is, of course, part of a larger cycle: the more you read, the better a reader you become, the more you like reading, so the more you read, and so on. It is this cycle that a focus on discrete, word-level skill-building ignores, and it is this cycle that college developmental reading classes must strive to generate. Self-selected reading for enjoyment, with all its implementation challenges, is key to the goal of creating life-long readers at the college level.

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