Proposal for Research:

Revisiting the Approach and Curriculum Design of English/LLD 100A

Katherine A. Masters
San Jose State University

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Abstract

English/Linguistics and Language Development 100A: Writing Competency through Genres is a course at San José State University for students who have failed the Writing Skills Test at least once and need more developmental coursework. The current curriculum is not designed by 100A instructors, but instructors have had some success in persuading the Writing Requirements Committee to adjust the curriculum each semester to better address the realities of the classroom. As of this proposal, a systematic evaluation of 100A and its exit standards has yet to be performed. Research has yet to be conducted on the effectiveness of the course design and materials in preparing students for 100W and upper division coursework, and the effects of the curriculum design on student and instructor attitude and performance. This project proposes an in-depth holistic analysis of the 100A context in order to increase understanding of 100A and its students, align the curriculum more realistically with the classroom environment and other campus writing courses and programs, and promote student and instructor satisfaction, motivation and engagement.

Background and Significance

University writing standards are critical to continuing the credibility of universities, ensuring that universities remain competitive and provide a competent workforce to state, national, and international communities. Standard writing tests and developmental writing courses are gatekeeping mechanisms to students who are underprepared for the rigors of academia. Statistics indicate that anywhere from one third to one half of students nationwide enter the university requiring developmental coursework in writing, math, or both (Attewall et al., 2006; Bettinger and Long, 2005; Callahan and Chumney, 2009), an effect of creating a more equitable and accessible public university for students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds over the last forty years (Ferris, 2009; Shin & Bruno, 2003). Although a number of studies have evaluated developmental writing programs and courses at colleges and universities (Attewell et al., 2006; Bettinger and Long, 2005; Callahan and Chumney, 2009; Garcia, 2009; Masters, 2010; Tubb, 1998), it is important to note that approaches that may work at one college or university will not work at another. For example, developmental writing programs in California, where 43% of its population speaks a language other than English at home ("United States Census Bureau"), should obviously differ in their approach to similar programs from other states that do not have such a diverse ethnic and linguistic population. Even approaches to developmental writing at different campuses within the same state should differ depending on student demographics, current writing program structures, policies, and other factors.

San José State University (SJSU) is a metropolitan state university in downtown San José, California that serves about 30,000 students and is one of the most diverse universities in the nation, with 56% of the Fall 2011 population reporting a minority ethnicity ("San José State

University"). Last year, the SJSU Research Foundation was awarded a $2 million federal grant to improve the writing skills of students. According to university data on the 2010 freshman class, the grant will support a large portion of current students:

> … nearly half of all freshman at San José State were not proficient in English. About 70 percent of black students, 60 percent of Hispanic students, 50 percent of Asian-American students and 30 percent of white students in the class of 2014 needed to take remedial English courses. (Goll, 2011)

In recent years, SJSU has taken steps to accommodate students in need of developmental writing courses. English/Linguistics and Language Development (LLD) 100A: Writing Competency through Genres is an intensive three-unit course at SJSU that satisfies the university standard Writing Skills Test (WST) for students who fail the test at least once (Gabor, 2011). The WST serves as one of two components that satisfy the California State University standard Graduate Writing Assesment Requirement (GWAR) (Gabor, 2011). ENGL/LLD 100A was designed with the rationale that "students who fail the WST repeatedly need writing instruction; the test does not provide instruction, only assessment" (Gabor, 2011, p. 5). It began as an experimental course (called 96S) in Summer Session 2010, was not offered in Fall 2010, and returned again as an experimental course in Spring 2011. From Summer 2011 to the present Summer 2012, it has run as a regular session course, ENGL/LLD 100A (Gabor, 2011). Therefore, 100A has only one full year as a non-experimental course at SJSU.

The current curriculum for 100A is designed by a subcommittee of the Writing Requirements Committee (WRC), consisting of members of the English and Linguistics and Language Development (LLD) departments, among other departments in the College of Humanities and the Arts (Gabor, 2011). In AY 2010-2011, of the six members on this committee, only one of them actually taught 100A. The current 100A curriculum takes "a genre-based approach to help students improve their writing and to develop students' awareness of the kinds of writing they will encounter in their professions" ("Academic English Program"). The curriculum also involves teaching rhetorical devices explicitly, integration of a full-length novel, and a requirement of 8,000 words of writing per student.

Students in 100A bring a variety of complex social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds to the class. Data gathered from informal, voluntary questionnaires given to students during the first week of class each semester that I have taught (Spring 2011, Summer 2011, Fall 2011, and Spring 2012) indicate that 100A does not have a dominant "type" of student who takes it (i.e. English language learning), nor does a particular major dominate (i.e. Engineering). Monolingual English speakers, English Language Learners (ELL), military veterans, returning students, students with learning disabilities, students with psychological disabilities, and students from all socioeconomic backgrounds take this course. English 100A is not an English as a Second or Other Language course, although a large minority of students fall within the umbrella term, "English language learning." Also based on my informal data, 100A students' choice in major is diverse: nursing, hospitality management, art, music, justice studies, history, psychology, engineering and business, among other majors are represented, with no one major dominating the course.

The current 100A curriculum is intense and demanding on both students and instructors. Students who are deemed underprepared for academia are required to write 8,000 words in 12

weeks (Masters, 2012). English 1A and 1B, SJSU's freshmen composition course, requires the same 8,000-word requirement, but students receive a full 16-week semester to fulfill the requirement. To produce 8,000 words in 12 weeks as opposed to 16 weeks produces tremendous stress in students and leads to attitudes of resentment towards the instructor and course, and has impacted campus writing and tutoring centers. Many students complain that they cannot get an appointment at campus tutoring and writing centers because of the popularity of these centers.

The grading burden on instructors is substantial, as they also are required to take students through a three-stage drafting process for all three papers in only 12 weeks: a peer review, a second draft commented on by instructors, and a graded, final draft. As well, instructors are required to hold personal, one-on-one conferences with each student for each of the three papers. For an instructor who teaches three sections, this means she will hold 180 conferences in three months. Lastly, grades for the entire course are based on students' final portfolio and a timed, written final exam. Prior points for work, tests, and participation gained prior to turning in the final portfolio are not weighted into the final grade. In the past, a miscellany of people have composed the 100A grading committee, including instructors, the coordinator, members of the Writing Requirements Committee, and faculty who do not teach the course, who read and grade all portfolios and final exams at the end of the semester. For Spring 2012, each portfolio was graded twice: once by the instructor of the students and once by another instructor or committee member. Each final exam was also graded twice, but the instructor of the student was not one of the graders. Because of the complex and cumbersome grading system, the coordinator has changed the process every semester; the course is continuously seeking a stable and valid standard of grading, which has not yet been developed.

Lastly, ENGL/LLD 100A is a "high stakes" course. Students who fail the course do not graduate to upper-division coursework and must spend the following semester retaking 100A or retaking the WST. In essence, one semester taking the course and failing, followed by another semester either taking the course or the WST equates to one full year that the student has not been able to progress toward his or her degree. Students feel that they have wasted both their time and money, and instructors who have little influence on curriculum and grading policies become targets of student frustration. Documented cases of student harassment toward teachers exist. Thus, it is of the upmost importance to revisit the curriculum and grading policies of 100A to design a more valid and effective model that has a less stressful impact on both instructors and students.

<div align="center">Project Description</div>

I propose to evaluate ENGL/LLD 100A in order to increase our understanding of this new course and its students, and improve the curriculum to align more realistically with university writing standards, student success, and student and instructor satisfaction, motivation and engagement. The study will take place at SJSU within four 100A classrooms, two in English and two in LLD, which will serve as research sites. I will conduct extensive observations in each classroom over the course of the semester. Through these observations, along with subsequent methods explained in the methodology section of this proposal, I will track effective and non-effective elements of the current course design, individual instructor approaches and methods to the course, and student-instructor and student-student interactions.

I will track students' transition into the academic discourse community, development in content knowledge, attitude and perspective. To better understand the differential access to classroom discourse experienced by learners of varied language and academic experience, I will identify five focal students for in-depth analysis: one recent immigrant who has been in the U.S. for fewer than five years, one immigrant who transitioned from bilingual education in high school or community college, one English-dominant student who attended monolingual English classes throughout elementary and high school, one student from a monolingual English speaking and non-immigrant background, and one student with a learning disability.

My research will also take me outside the classroom into other spaces impacted by 100A, like the campus Writing Center, Learning Assistance Resource Center, and 100W classrooms. I will interview faculty, staff, and students who work with current and former 100A students to better understand the obstacles that they have while in 100A and after they take 100A. Former 100A students will also provide insight in interviews and on questionnaires into struggles that they have experienced transitioning into 100W and upper division coursework.

The following questions guide my research:

- What kinds of skills and knowledge does the current curriculum promote, and how well does it prepare students' for their future academic needs in 100W and upper division coursework?
- Which practices within the 100A curriculum facilitate simultaneous learning of academic language and content?
- How well do individual students with different language and academic backgrounds achieve the objectives set forth in the curriculum, as well as appropriate academic language skills associated with those objectives?
- How does the current curriculum design and grading policy affect the instructors' ability, if at all, to effectively and meaningfully prepare for and teach to the diverse needs of the classroom?

The prospective timeline for this proposal is one full year: Fall 2012, Spring 2013, and Summer 2013. Fall 2012 will include initiating the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, constructing a literature review on developmental writing programs and researching current California State University and University of California approaches to the development of student writing, constructing data-gathering methods via the theory and approaches discussed in the methodology section of this proposal, and facilitating other aspects of this projects in preparation for field work.

I will initiate fieldwork in Spring 2013. Classroom observations; faculty, staff, and student questionnaires and interviews; and analyses of textbooks, materials, and methods will commence. Due to the in-depth, holistic methods of ethnography, a full semester will provide ample opportunity for data collection. I will take Summer 2013 to conclude my findings and suggest alternative approaches to 100A based on those findings.

Methods

Methodology for the above outlined project is based in critical theory and will undertake ethnographic research methods. Critical theory integrates reflexive inquiry into its

methodology and contends to critique and change society as a whole, as opposed to traditional positivistic and interpretive approaches oriented only to understanding or explaining it (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Horkheimer (1982) defines a theory as critical if it seeks "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (p. 244). Although not a prevailing theory in the U.S. because of the nation's established traditions of positivistic and management approaches in education (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Freire, 1970), critical theory is a valid approach to educational research in the U.S. because of its potential for understanding and working with the nation's pluralism and distinct educational divisions across socio-economic lines:

> …our own technologically advanced society [The U.S.] …to our detriment acts to program the individual – especially the disadvantaged – to rigid conformity. A new underclass has been created, and it is everyone's responsibility to react thoughtfully and positively to the situation. (Publisher's foreword, 2000)

Ethnography considers elements of an issue that cannot be fully clarified by positivistic, quantitative research (Hymes, 1974; Gumperz, 1997; Carsprecken, 1996), such as "…sociocultural processes in language learning, how institutional and societal pressures are played out in moment-to-moment classroom interaction, and how to gain a more holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions to aid teacher training and improve practice" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 575). Critical ethnography concentrates on the overlooked biases that may result from implied assumptions gained from traditional positivistic and even other interpretivist approaches. Within the classroom, this approach is beneficial in establishing symbolic interactions, dissecting ideology from practice, and recognizing the cognition and behavior of the students and instructors within historical, cultural, and social structures (Simon & Dippo,1986). Entering the 100A context from a critical theoretical viewpoint and utilizing ethnographic research methods is a valid starting point to better understanding the 100A classroom because of its values of effective and meaningful change that can emancipate both student and instructor from a currently difficult and restricting course structure, and promote a more autonomous, collaborative learning environment.

The methodology I undertake is qualitative, holistic and emic. Qualitative measures will take the form of fieldwork, classroom observation and participant observation, student and instructor surveys, informal and semi-structured interviewing, textbook analysis, and analysis of teaching methods, with particular foci on students' implicit, culturally learned background knowledge, and attitudes and beliefs on 100A, as well as instructors' implicit, culturally learned background knowledge, attitudes and beliefs on 100A, students, and the policies and curriculum under which they work. My study is holistic in that I aim to learn about this 100A space not only through the immediate environment of the classroom, but also through contexts outside the classroom that may influence the classroom, such as the campus Writing Center, the Learning Assistance Resource Center, and administrative constraints. The theory behind this holistic approach is that all parts of a system have unity and are connected (Diesling, 1971).

The research is also emic, as I introduce the experiences and ideas of the students and instructors in order to understand how they "define the world" (Spradley, 1979, p. 14), or in this case, the 100A classroom and other spaces associated with it. An emic perspective benefits classroom research such as this because the conclusions one draws from what one observes as an "outsider" to the established community (in this case a classroom setting) are flawed if one does

not take into account the reasoning or limitations of the person(s) being observed (Spradley, 1979).

Thus, I will collect data on the following: (1) current 100A policies and procedures, (2) instructor teaching methods, techniques, and activities (3) instructor attitude, (4) student participation and attitude, (5) student-student communication, (6) student-instructor communication (including miscommunication or misunderstanding), and (7) student English proficiency and academic proficiency levels. Here, academic proficiency is the ability to perform at the university level regarding time-management, organization, and expectations.

Expected Outcomes

The current model for 100A views student under-preparedness as a problem that can be remediated quickly by hammering an intensive, rhetoric-based curriculum at it, sacrificing the quality of writing for quantity, and burdening instructors and students with a limited time frame in which to teach critical writing elements of grammar, content and style, as well as critical thinking and basic academic skills and habits.

This research will expedite the already on-going process that instructors and coordinator are currently engaging in to redesign 100A. By conducting an in-depth inquiry into 100A, we can validate current approaches to writing and critical thinking that we interpret to be positive aspects of the curriculum, and make informed adjustments to ineffective elements of its design. Also, this research will move 100A toward providing a more meaningful and liberating experience to students that provides a smoother, confident transition to 100W and upper division coursework. Finally the changes that this research will inform will lead to more instructor autonomy over their pedagogy and greater retention of experienced and passionate instructors who currently feel limited by the current course design.

Potential Contribution to Improvement of Education

This research has tremendous potential for the improvement of writing education at SJSU at a time when the university is calling for change in its structure of writing programs through "…building a 'culture of writing' across the curriculum that values…writing in all settings, and engages in ongoing, systematic, formative assessment of the effectiveness of writing programs with an eye to continuous improvement" (Adler-Kassner & Andson, 2011, p. 3). This research will directly support the efforts of the new Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) project, which "seeks to improve the writing skills of Asian American, Generation 1.5, and other Under-Represented Minority (URM) students ("AANAPISI grant"). Among the project's goals is to "assess and reorganize the existing writing support services at SJSU" ("AANAPISI grant"). Thus, my research will begin the effort to align the labyrinth of writing programs and cultures at SJSU toward the ultimate goal of stronger retention and graduation rates for historically underrepresented student populations.

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