RE-ENVISIONING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE READING PROGRAM: ACADEMIC READING INSTRUCTION AS AN INTEGRATED AND RECURSIVE PROCESS

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by

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by

Shawn Marie Delight-Frederking

Fall 2010

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DEDICATION

For my amazing husband, Gregory Wise Frederking
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This thesis describes, analyzes, and then recommends changes to the design of a community college Reading Program. According to placement test results, the majority of Willowbrook College (pseudonym) students test below college level in reading at the time of enrollment; however, the Reading Program only serves a very low percentage of the students who need reading instruction (approximately 16 percent). This study describes the existing reading program using data gathered from Willowbrook employees, course outlines, sample reading textbooks, and the placement test manuals. The data is then analyzed using current reading and literacy theory from leading experts in the field including Stephen B. Kucer, Patricia A. Alexander, and Pamela N. Mueller. Analysis of the program design leads to conclusions about the underlying theoretical
assumptions in the current program. As a result of this analysis, the author recommends that Willowbrook change its approach to reading instruction—change is not only recommended for the theoretical underpinnings driving the reading pedagogy, but also for the overall design of the Willowbrook Reading Program.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

He ate and drank the precious words.  
His spirit grew robust;  
He knew not more that he was poor,  
Nor that his frame was dust.

He danced along the dingy days,  
And this bequest of wings  
Was but a book. What liberty  
A loosened spirit brings!

Emily Dickinson  
Precious Words

Reading has the potential to enrich the human spirit, foster hope, and create opportunity—I have witnessed this first hand. Yet many students who come to the community college where I work are frustrated with reading; many have spent twelve or more years of their lives fighting to make meaning out of tiny symbols on white paper. Now they are adults, still fighting, yet dreaming of a better life. They want to be independent; they long to be productive members of their communities; they seek security for their families through viable and personally meaningful employment; they seek to nurture their children in safety; they long to be included in academia, and their voices should be heard, for they are intelligent and sincere. I have worked with hundreds of students over the past two years. These emerging—though still struggling—scholars have captured my attention because I see so many of them spend countless hours working
extremely hard, wanting with all their spirits to be allowed through the gates of academia, yet most of them eventually give up. Something is terribly wrong, and I want to contribute to a solution. Therefore, this thesis has its roots firmly fastened to my heartfelt desire to help evoke a “loosened spirit . . .” within each of these students (Dickinson).

Willowbrook College (a pseudonym) serves students from two adjoining counties, and many of these students come from families of low socio-economic status and limited educational attainment. As of September 2010, Pacific County (pseudonym) had one of the highest unemployment rates in the state at 17.2 percent, and Willow County (pseudonym) had the second highest unemployment rate in the state—19 percent (California Employment Development Department [EDD]). As of 2008, about 79 percent of Pacific County’s population had a high school diploma, but only about 18 percent had completed a four-year degree or higher; likewise, about 79 percent of Willow County’s population had completed high school, but only about 13 percent had completed a four year degree or higher (United States Census Bureau).

I am an instructional associate, and I spend most of my time working in the language arts center (pseudonym), a collaborative study space open to all enrolled students. In the center, students can get support for the work that they do in any class that asks them to write or read. Students can work alone, or they can choose to work with other students, a peer tutor, an instructional associate, a faculty member, or any combination of the above. We pride ourselves on being a community, a place where everyone’s knowledge is valued and contributes to the whole. I spend forty hours a week in this center, and I love it, but (as mentioned above) I have noticed that a disturbingly large number of the students who frequent our center seem to have great difficulty with
reading comprehension. More often than not, when a student is struggling with a particular assignment it is because they have somehow failed to accurately make meaning from an assigned text. Upon further investigation, I discovered that according to our placement test statistics, the majority of our students have difficulty with “college level” reading. In the fall of 2010, 61 percent of our entering students tested below college level in reading comprehension, yet less than 16 percent of those students enrolled in the suggested reading classes (Institutional Researcher). Of the students who do enroll in reading classes, very few make it through to graduation. According to data from our institutional researcher, if a cohort of 100 students start out in our lowest level reading class (Reading 1), only 8 can be expected to successfully complete the college-level composition class (English 1A), which meets both the reading and English graduation requirements.

The reading program is in the process of review, and (in the beginning) it appeared that there was no one to complete the task. For 20 years, Willowbrook College had one full-time reading professor, but she retired in the spring of 2010, and because of recent financial turmoil, which resulted in layoffs and a hiring freeze, it is uncertain whether her full-time, tenure-track position will be filled. In the meantime, the eight sections of developmental reading courses are being taught by part-time instructors. A volunteer committee of college employees is currently conducting the reading program review. I am on this committee along with two full-time ESL instructors, two part-time reading instructors, four full-time English instructors and one other full-time Instructional Associate in Language Arts. Our task is to review the existing reading program, write
Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), and make recommendations for the future, which includes faculty hiring.

As of this writing, we have had five meetings filled with healthy debate at best and tumultuous (and sometimes hurtful) dialogue at worst. Most committee members feel that the program can and should be modified, but how much it should change and what it should look like has proven to be a source of contention. A difference in pedagogy seems to be at the root of some disagreements. The “reading wars” that I have read about in the scholarly literature are alive and well at our college. Some seem to feel that keeping mostly with the “status quo” (four levels of remediation in stand-alone reading classes) is reasonable and suggest that we can reach more students by simply making reading mandatory for students who need it. Others feel strongly that the entire approach needs to be scrutinized. They feel that the program design and pedagogical practices should be based on current empirically sound reading theory. This same group contends that the Willowbrook Reading Program needs to attract more students—not by making reading mandatory—but by making the classes more relevant (in the students’ experience, not the teachers’) to our students’ educational goals. I suspect that in the end, some compromise will prevail.

The Research Question

In this project, I attempt to answer the following question: given the institutional constraints, what is the optimal reading program design for Willowbrook College? I begin with a review of literature that explores the nature of reading development using empirically sound theories and models of the reading process. Next, I
describe the data that I gathered from Willowbrook employees, textbooks, placement
tests, and committee meetings. The data is then examined through a lens of current
reading and literacy theory; using this analysis, I draw conclusions and make
recommendations for the program design.

In order to protect the privacy of all individuals who so graciously participated
in this study, no real names will be used, including the name of the college where the
study takes place. Consequently, the name Willowbrook is fictional, as are the names of
any courses, committees, or other aspects that may identify the college or its employees.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Becoming literate rather than being literate more accurately describes our relationship with written language.

Stephen B. Kucer

An effective reading program design must be firmly grounded in a solid understanding of the reading acquisition process. Therefore, this review of the literature explores current, widely respected, theories and models which not only explain the nature of reading development, but also discuss implications for educational design and instructional practices. This review includes the work of three prominent experts in the field of reading: Dr. Stephen B. Kucer, a well respected professor of language and literacy education at the University of Washington, and member of the Reading Commission for the National Council of Teachers of English; Dr. Patricia A. Alexander, a distinguished scholar and teacher at the University of Maryland; and Pamela N. Mueller, a widely respected researcher who has been a reading teacher and consultant at the elementary, middle, and high school levels for more than twenty-five years.

The scholarly answers to the questions, “What is reading?” and “How do people learn to read?” vary depending on which scholar is doing the answering. In his book *Dimensions of Literacy*, Stephen B. Kucer, explains his own model of the reading process, which he puts forth within the context of what he calls a “multidimensional
view” of literacy (3). Kucer contends that “if literacy education is to be effective, it is important that literacy be conceived as dynamic and multidimensional in nature” (4). He goes on to explain that educational approaches to literacy have historically been influenced by whichever academic discipline happens to be dominant at the time, and various disciplines tend to view literacy through their own theoretical lenses. According to Kucer:

Linguists emphasize the language or textual dimensions of reading and writing. Cognitive psychologists explore the mental processes that are used to generate meaning through and from print. Socioculturalists view acts of literacy as expressions of group identity that signal power relationships. Developmentalists focus on the strategies employed and the patterns displayed in the learning of reading and writing. (3)

Kucer concludes that although each discipline has contributed an important piece to our understanding of literacy acquisition, reducing our pedagogical approaches to any single dimension can be detrimental for our students (7).

Kucer further asserts that, “becoming literate means learning to effectively, efficiently, and simultaneously control the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of written language in a transactive fashion” (4). Kucer and co-authors Cecilia Silva and Esther Delgado-Larocco envision a “dimensions of literacy” model with four concentric circles—each circle representing one dimension: cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental. Each “literacy event” is illustrated in the model as an acute angle, vertex dead center of the concentric four, rays extending to infinity. According to Heath, “a literacy event is ‘any acting sequence involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role’” (qtd. in Kucer 7-10).
The cognitive dimension at the center serves as the impetus for the “literacy event” and represents (in part) the “desire of the language user to explore, discover, construct, and share meaning” (Kucer 5). In addition to this initial decision to create meaning, the cognitive dimension represents the processes used by the meaning maker to facilitate the creation of meaning. Research has shown that readers engage in various “mental processes, strategies, and procedures” in order to construct meaning from a text (Kucer 91).

Encompassing the cognitive dimension is the linguistic dimension. Used to decode the symbols on the page, it “is concerned with the analysis of text as an object of study” (Kucer 17). According to Kucer, the linguistic dimension can be thought of as many interrelated “systems of language” working together to represent meaning in a “dual structured” system of communication (19). The systems of language include pragmatic, text type, genre, text structure, semantic, syntactic, morphemic, orthographic, graphophonemic and graphemic (42). The dual structure refers to the fact that our language system contains both surface and deep aspects. The symbols or “signs” (“something that stands for something else”) are surface features of language, and the meanings connected to the “signs” are deep features of language (19-20). “Decoding” these various systems is imperative to the process of reading, but linguistic knowledge is only one aspect of this complex process of meaning making.

The cognitive and linguistic dimensions of literacy are nested within the sociocultural dimension. Kucer argues that literacy is not simply the result of individuals knowing and using linguistic and cognitive tools, but it is also a product of social interaction. Literacy is a “patterned social act” belonging to a particular group of people
(198). Kucer draws on the insights of James Gee, maintaining that if we ignore the sociocultural dimension of literacy, it “situates literacy in the individual person rather than in the society of which that person is a member. As such it obscures the multiple ways in which reading, writing, and language interrelate with the workings of power and desire in social life” (qtd. in Kucer 197). Literacy is not an autonomous act “divorced” from how it is used in the world but situated within a social context.

The outermost ring in Kucer’s concentric model represents the developmental dimension of literacy—a never-ending process of growth. This perpetual growth is reflected in “the individual’s ability to effectively and efficiently engage the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of literacy in an ever widening range of contexts” (249). Kucer further illustrates that the process of becoming more efficient and effective in negotiating these dimensions of literacy is not a “neat, tidy, linear, step-by-step” process—“these dimensions are negotiated and grappled with all at once” (249). This is a recursive process of continuous development as the learner gains access to more cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural strategies and processes, which the meaning maker applies to an ever-widening range of contexts.

Kucer describes reading as a “quest for meaning”—indeed he asserts that all language use is “permeated” with this quest (125). He envisions reading as a “transaction” between the reader, the writer, and the text, maintaining that many factors influence this transaction. The nature of these influencing factors can vary, which has a direct effect on the making of meaning (or not) that comes about as a result of the relationship between writer and reader (118). Kucer points out that
Too often, when text processing problems are experienced, responsibility is given to only one of the two participants. If a child experiences difficulty reading a story, for example, the teacher may hold the reader accountable for the problem. The child is thought not to have developed proficiency with the strategies that are necessary for successfully generating meaning from the text, or the teacher may feel that the student has not been adequately prepared for the reading. In contrast if the teacher encounters difficulty reading a student paper, the writer is often held responsible. In this case, it is the author who is thought not to have developed proficiency with the strategies that are necessary for successfully generating text meanings. (118-119)

Kucer points out that when there is difficulty in the communication between author and reader, it may or may not be the case that one of them is the “source of the problem,” but “communication is a two-way process” (119). Therefore, it is important to analyze “the contributions of both individuals” (119).

There are many factors influencing this communication process, and these factors include the various systems of language, cognitive strategies, background knowledge, purpose, and the learner’s ability to “assimilate and accommodate” knowledge (118-119). Kucer demonstrates, using miscue analysis, that “the relationship between the reader’s language and the writer’s language influences the ease with which a text can be processed” (119). In addition to the language system “match” between reader and writer, the availability of cognitive processes (and the ability to be flexible in their use) influences the ability of both readers and writers “to create meaning through written discourse” (120). Background knowledge also influences the communication between reader and writer. According to Kucer, “the more the reader’s and author’s backgrounds parallel each other, the smoother the construction of meaning is likely to be” (120). He adds that this background knowledge relationship “is more than an issue of amount or quantity” because the “organization of the knowledge and its depth or extensiveness” is also an important factor determining the ease of meaning making (120). In addition, the
purpose, or goal, for reading also “has a significant impact on how and what meanings are ultimately constructed through written discourse” (121). In other words, the reader of a text will create different meanings depending on why it is being read. For example, if readers are searching for specific information, they may simply scan the text until they find what they are looking for, but if a reader’s goal is to analyze a text, that reader will need to do a much closer reading, and the meaning created as a result of these two dissimilar purposes is extremely different.

Kucer additionally illustrates that the assimilation and accommodation of knowledge impacts the communication between writer and reader. He explains that the result of meaning making often causes cognitive change as new knowledge is built, and if “the meanings constructed through print fit within the knowledge structures of the reader or writer, . . . this results in an “elaboration or extension of the existing knowledge structures” (121). In this case, the knowledge is assimilated into the learner’s “existing cognitive frameworks” (121). If the information does not fit into the language user’s “existing knowledge structures” an “accommodation of what is known is required,” and if the language user is unable to adequately modify their existing knowledge structure, a miscommunication between writer and reader can occur (121).

Like Stephen Kucer, Patricia Alexander sees reading as a life-long process, and she describes her developmental model of learning in a paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference. She asserts that we “must take another look at what it means to read competently” taking into account “not just the early years . . . but across the lifespan, as the purposes for reading and the character of written language change” (414). Alexander explains that there are two “complementary perspectives on reading
development” one which focuses on “emergent literacy” emphasizing “reading acquisition, including phonological awareness, vocabulary, and fluency” and a broader view which “extends well beyond the initial period of basic skill and process acquisition” (414-415). Alexander maintains that the life-long development view “has important educational benefits” because struggling adolescent and adult readers are different from young children; consequently, there is a need to understand the “nature” of literacy development throughout life (415). She also points out that older learners need different “approaches and interventions” because they are different “cognitively, physically, and socially.” In addition, the types of literacy “demands” that they encounter are also very different than those encountered by children (415).

Alexander describes her “research based” Model of Domain Learning (MDL) which looks at academic domains and “explores systematic changes” in “cognitive and motivational factors” as they occur in “three stages of development” (417). Instead of looking at literacy development in terms of age or grade levels, Alexander categorizes learners according to developmental stages: “acclimation, competence, and proficiency/expertise” (417). She asserts that, though more young learners are likely to be in the acclimation stage, there are people of all ages and grades in this first stage (423). Alexander has examined several factors influencing the reading process, exploring how they change in each stage of reading development.

Alexander asserts that a learner’s “knowledge of language and knowledge of content domains are critical forces in developing competence” in reading (417). She separates knowledge into two categories: domain knowledge and topic knowledge. Domain knowledge describes general, broad knowledge about a specific discipline or
category of knowing, and topic knowledge describes specific knowledge. An example of
domain knowledge might be a general understanding of child development, and an
example of topic knowledge might be a specific understanding of Piaget’s stages of
development. According to Alexander, “domain and topic knowledge become
increasingly interconnected as individuals achieve competence” (418).

In addition to knowledge, Alexander has found that “personal interest” is a
“driving force” in reading development, and she categorizes interest into “situational”
and “individual” (420). Situational interest is more fleeting in that it is activated by the
context of the immediate reading situation. For example, the teacher may have piqued a
student’s interest in a text by posing a provocative question, or a catchy title may arouse
situational interest in a text. In contrast, individual interest is often related to a student’s
life. For instance, a learner may be interested in reading about the Vietnam War because
that learner’s father was killed while serving in the military during that war. Alexander
examines the roles that each type of interest plays in the development of readers on their
journey toward proficiency. She found that at the acclimation stage, situational interest is
the dominant motivator, and at the proficiency/expert stage, individual interest becomes
the primary motivator for reading. Interestingly, in the middle level (competence) both
types of interest seem similarly motivating, although the trajectory as a learner moves
through the developmental stages reflects a downward trend for situational and an
upward trend for individual. Alexander concludes that “over time, readers who become
competent in reading must find an abiding connection between themselves and written
language. A passion for the process of reading or for encounters with specific forms of
text . . . is necessary for the continued journey into competence or expertise” (421).
Interest helps motivate learners to read, but once we are reading, we inevitably need tools to help us solve comprehension problems as they arise; Alexander also studied how cognitive processes and strategies are employed at different stages of development. Like her categories of interest, she also separates cognitive processing strategies into two distinct categories: “surface-level and deep-processing strategies” (421). Surface-level strategies help readers gain “initial access” to understanding texts, and deep processing strategies help readers connect the information to existing knowledge (422). Examples of surface-level strategies include rereading, summarizing, and using contextual clues; examples of deep processing strategies include analysis, finding connections between different texts, and questioning the author’s reasoning. According to Alexander’s findings, readers who are in the early stages of reading development must rely more heavily on surface-level strategies to help them make meaning from the text, but as they gain domain knowledge and interest, deep processing strategies are more evident. She documented an increase in deep processing strategies and a decrease in surface-level strategies as the reader develops toward proficiency and expertise (421).

Alexander further describes six reader profiles “of more and less successful readers” (426). The most successful are termed “Highly competent readers,” and these readers have a good grasp on language as well as both surface-level and deep processing strategies. They also have a solid base of background knowledge to draw on when they encounter texts, and are “actively engaged” in the meaning making process. In contrast, the least successful readers are “seriously challenged readers.” These readers may have “language processing difficulties, limited background knowledge, strategic insufficiencies and negative motivational conditions” (428). Alexander maintains that the
further development of “seriously challenged” readers is at “great risk” because their difficulties are “complex,” and she further asserts that “all aspects of reading development” need to be addressed if these students are to be helped. Unless educators help them develop “knowledge, interest, and strategic processing, these seriously challenged readers may never be able to feel competent in reading, or experience the pleasure of reading that others do” (428). Alexander has also profiled four other categories of readers who are somewhere in-between “highly proficient” and “seriously challenged” readers: “effortful processors,” “knowledge-reliant readers,” “nonstrategic processors,” and “resistant readers” (428). She gives descriptions of their difficulties and offers suggestions for helping them develop their reading competence; she reiterates that readers who are in the acclimation stage “are especially vulnerable and in need of appropriate scaffolding” that takes into account motivation and interest, knowledge, and cognitive strategies (431).

Pamela Mueller, a reading consultant, is also interested in these “vulnerable” readers. Her book *Lifers: Learning from at Risk Adolescent Readers* poignantly describes the difficulties of struggling readers from a different point of view—the student’s. Her book is filled with case study accounts of these frustrated readers. Muller gives an overview of their plight:

> They hover on the precipice of academic failure. Lacking the literacy and learning skills to succeed in the traditional secondary classroom, they generally get poor grades, have negative relationships with teachers, and feel alienated from a place they see as unfair and a “boring waste of time.” Acting out a particular role in the culture of failure in which they find themselves cast, these student “performers” do all in their power to live up to the low expectations that others have for them—and, indeed, that they have for themselves. (XVI)
She goes on to describe how most of them have had difficult home lives and how they have been “victimized . . . emotionally and intellectually” (XVI).

Mueller chronicles how many of these “at-risk” readers have been identified as such since kindergarten or the first grade with the label of “poor reader” following them throughout their entire school career. She asserts that the initial expectations of the kindergarten teacher are not “based on academic potential or performance” but nevertheless put certain students on a trajectory toward academic failure. Muller cites Allington and Cunningham who identify four factors that predict academic failure for young students: “family poverty, parental educational attainment, gender, and perceived immaturity” (XV). It is as if these students are doomed to fail because of the circumstances that they were born into. Mueller declares that “lower class students who come to school lacking the social, linguistic, and intellectual resources deemed necessary for success . . . become trapped in a cistern of failure”(XV). She also asserts that our educational systems do not help these students because the remedial efforts, based on several “faulty assumptions,” are ineffective.

Mueller lists six “faulty assumptions” identified by Richard L. Allington and Sean A. Walmsley: 1) believing that “not all children can become literate with their peers,” 2) assuming that it is possible to “measure children’s literacy aptitude,” 3) believing that “children learn best in homogeneous groups” 4) assuming that “reading is a hierarchy of increasingly complex skills” 5) concluding that “some children need slowed-down and more concrete instruction” 6) believing that some students need to be pulled out of the classroom so that “special teachers” can meet their learning needs (XVI-XVII). Mueller asserts that many of our schools use “dubious educational practices” even though
there has been research “refuting their worth” (22). She contends that many students are able to learn to read in spite of these questionable practices; however, the “fragile learners” have difficulty because they are “victims of a system that remains unresponsive to their needs” (22).

A common denominator for all the students in Mueller’s study was that their early reading instruction used “decoding as the primary focus” (23). In case after case, Mueller illustrates how the “at-risk” adolescents in her study came to kindergarten and first grade with a love of reading, because of positive experiences with their parents, but were turned off to reading by the phonics-only approach that they encountered in school. She contends that the early teachers of these students—despite “what the research could have told them”—used an ineffective pedagogical approach when they limited the reading instruction to only phonics, thereby unwittingly dooming these students to a life of reading difficulties. Mueller further asserts that the teachers often do not even reflect on their teaching practices when some of the children are having difficulty—“many of these educators lack the expertise or the professional support to help them figure out what else to do when their teaching method isn’t successful” (24). As Mueller explains, methods of instruction can be problematic—teachers may ignore the individual needs of students, blindly subscribing to a “one size fits all” approach; fail to give students “choice” in their reading materials; emphasize “decoding” over understanding, and/or fail to create a safe, comfortable, connected classroom environment (25-42).

Mueller asserts that we can learn quite a bit from the “at-risk” readers in our schools, and her case studies illustrate how. At the conclusion of each case study, she gives a detailed list outlining what we can learn from each student. Mueller contends that
“we need to rethink our view of reading and reading instruction in our schools, placing less emphasis on skill lessons keyed to hierarchical scope-and-sequence charts and more emphasis on authentic reading activities that incorporate the strategies good readers use” (68). She implores us to reflect on ineffective practices and change those that are not serving out students. Mueller urges us to scrutinize our teacher preparation and staff development programs, making sure that they reflect current research about effective teaching methods and practices. She agrees with Allington and Walmsley who assert that there is no “quick fix for our literacy dilemma” because “literacy programs cannot be bundled into child-and teacher-proof curriculum packets”; however, we can make changes if we are willing to take the “time, effort, and unwavering commitment” (71). Mueller acknowledges that it can be “frightening” because we will need to take risks and be willing to confront the discomfort of “new beliefs and concepts [that] clash with old ones” (71). Change can come when “concerned educators . . . are willing to read about reflect on, discuss, and experiment with innovative ideas in order to make a difference for their students” (71).

Both Muller and Kucer encourage educators to view reading development in a holistic manner. Instead of reducing literacy acquisition to a process of incremental skill and knowledge building, these authors encourage us to take into account the sociocultural and developmental dimensions by giving students meaning making opportunities within a variety of authentic contexts instead of isolated skill sequences. Muller pushes against this “arbitrary skill sequence” approach to literacy arguing that “more often than not the reading is left out of the reading lesson” (XVII). Kucer describes a “great debate” between literacy acquisition theorists, explaining that not all experts agree on the best
way to teach reading (300). Some experts view “decoding” as the basis for literacy development, putting emphasis on graphophonemic knowledge as the best starting place for students, while others view the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge, such as studying word parts (morphemes) and vocabulary, as the starting place for literacy. Kucer calls this second approach the “skills” approach. Both “decoding” and “skills” advocates see literacy development as an individual process that must happen in a sequential, step-by-step manner (Kucer 295). Both Kucer and Mueller resist these “reductionist” views of literacy development, arguing that learning how to read is much more complicated than a simple set of skills or processes to be mastered.

Muller encourages educators to use a “combination approach” to instruction, and she cites Marilyn J. Adams who contends that “phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relationships, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and writing with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions, and the meanings of texts” (qtd. in Muller 23). Kucer would agree with Muller, as he argues that the four dimensions of literacy need to “operate in a transactive and symbiotic fashion” because this is the way that “authentic, real-world literacy events” operate (3001).

Alexander does not discuss the “great debate,” but she does closely examine the nature of literacy development, and her model takes into account not only cognitive processes and strategies but also knowledge development, interest and motivation as they unfold in different authentic contexts throughout a learner’s lifetime. Alexander, Mueller, and Kucer all agree that not all readers are able to easily acquire all that they need without explicit scaffolding, modeling, and direct teaching methods that de-mystify the
reading comprehension process as it unfolds within different authentic sociocultural contexts.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned previously, this study seeks to define the optimal Reading Program design for Willowbrook College—but before attempting to improve a program, it is important to first understand it thoroughly. Therefore, a thorough description and analysis of the current reading program is important. In order to accomplish this, I first gathered data that would enable me to paint a collective picture of the program from several different viewpoints, and I then analyzed that data using several pointed inquiry questions while triangulating that information with the reading theory described in the literature review.

Analysis Questions

The analysis questions below are designed to help me: 1) understand the current Reading Program, 2) evaluate the current Reading Program in light of applicable theory and expert opinion, and 3) develop empirically sound future recommendations for the Reading Program.

- What are the underlying theoretical assumptions of the current program?
- How does the current program’s design reflect these tacit assumptions?
- How do these assumptions line up with current reading theory?
- What are the reading needs of students at Willowbrook College?
• How well does the current program meet the reading needs of the students?
• How can the program more effectively meet the needs of the students?
• What is the best reading program design for Willowbrook College?

Subjects Interviewed

A Reading Teacher

I interviewed a reading teacher who served as Reading Department chair and full-time faculty member at Willowbrook for twenty years before she retired in the spring of 2010. With a master’s in reading, she is an expert in the field, and for my purposes, her perspective on Willowbrook’s Reading Program is invaluable—she, perhaps better than anyone, understands the purpose, history, and design of the reading program. I e-mailed her a list of twenty-five questions (see Appendix A) ahead of time so that she would know what to expect, and a few days later we met for about an hour to discuss the questions. The interview was recorded and then later transcribed and used to describe and analyze Willowbrook’s current Reading Program.

A Counselor

The counselor that I interviewed has been at Willowbrook for more than thirty years. It was important to get a perspective of the reading program from a counselor’s point of view because counselors have a different objective than teachers—counselors need to look at academic programs in terms of how they fit into the academic plan of each student, and they need to assess whether or not each student would benefit from participation in the program. In addition, this particular counselor’s perspective is especially valuable because of her longevity of service at Willowbrook. She has
witnessed how the Reading Program has changed and evolved over the years in a way that many others have not. It was important not only to understand her view of how well the Reading Program helps students reach their academic goals, but also to get her sense of student satisfaction with the program. Just as I did with the teacher interview described above, I e-mailed the counselor a list of twenty-three questions (see Appendix B) ahead of time so that she would know what to expect, and a few days later we met for about an hour to discuss the questions. The interview was recorded and then later transcribed and used to describe and analyze Willowbrook’s current Reading Program.

The Institutional Researcher

The institutional researcher that I interviewed is a fairly new employee at Willowbrook; nevertheless, he has studied the student success rates in the Reading Program. Not only has he documented statistics about the current Reading Program, but he has also studied one of the experimental classes that was offered for four semesters. In addition, he has made it his business to understand nationwide trends and statistics in developmental education—his expertise was invaluable to my purposes. Although the statistics do not capture the entire picture, they are, nonetheless, a valuable piece of the puzzle which helped me to understand the whole. I e-mailed the institutional researcher a list of seventeen questions (see Appendix C) ahead of time so that he would know what to expect, and a few days later we met for about an hour to discuss the questions. The interview was recorded and then later transcribed and used to describe and analyze Willowbrook’s current Reading Program.
Data Gathered

The Reading Program Committee Minutes

These public documents chronicle a quest to evaluate the exiting reading program at Willowbrook College and make recommendations for its future. They contain notes of the informative discussions between Willowbrook employees who are experts in the fields of reading, ESL, and English. Reviewing the debates between these experts, who were deciding the best future design of the Willowbrook Reading Program, not only gives me an insight into myriad perspectives from experts in the field of literacy development, but also helps me to understand and describe the existing Reading Program. The committee membership has changed over the course of several months, but the voices in the Friday afternoon conversations have included: seven English faculty members, four reading faculty members, two ESL faculty members, two instructional associates, two counselors, and one administrator.

The Textbook Examples

I examined three different reading texts that have been used in Willowbrook’s Reading Program recently in order understand the subject matter that is taught, the kinds of texts students are asked to read, and the kinds of activities students may be engaging in during class. I compared two different books used at the lower level in order to assess how the program may be shifting at the Reading 1 and Reading 2 levels, and I examined a text at the highest reading level in order to compare the differences in approach and the differences in the expectations between the highest and lowest levels. I wanted to understand the academic sequence and how the approach to teaching reading changes as the levels progress. It is important to understand that these texts are not necessarily used
in every reading classroom at Willowbrook, but they do give a glimpse into many of the reading classes, thereby adding valuable information to my understanding of the entire program.

The Placement Test

I examined information from the ACCUPLACER™ “Coordinator’s Guide” and the “Online Technical Manual” about the placement test because I wanted to understand how and why students were placed in the various levels of the Reading Program. I wanted to find out how the test assesses each student’s reading level, and why the test-makers think the test is accurate. I also examined how the testing company defines the results by examining their proficiency statements, which were designed to outline the reading capabilities of students who score at certain levels.
CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION OF DATA

While it was common, until recently, to refer to “Academic Literacy” as a unitary concept, there is now an increasing recognition among scholars that students arrive on college campuses with multiple literacies. Similar to the acceptance of the concept of World Englishes to replace the singularity of English, the conception of multiple literacies gives recognition to the diverse backgrounds, cognitive styles, and “funds of knowledge” . . . that students have acquired elsewhere.

Faridah Pawan and Michelle A. Honeyford
“Academic Literacy.” Handbook of College Reading and Study Strategy Research

This chapter describes the data collected for this study. Again, the objective of this study is to recommend the best possible Reading Program design for Willowbrook College, but in order to accomplish this task, a complete description and analysis of the existing program is imperative. With these objectives in mind, I made deliberate decisions about what data to gather. I collected data that would help me understand the placement test; I interviewed Willowbrook employees with various viewpoints and perspectives; I studied the Reading Program Review Committee (RPRC) meeting minutes; I studied the placement exams, and I took excerpts from three different reading texts for comparison purposes. The data categories include the placement test, information from teachers, information from the institutional researcher, information from a counselor, and samples of reading textbook excerpts.
The Placement Test

Every student who attends Willowbrook College must take a placement test, and according to one of the teachers, the (then) research director of the college chose to use the ACCUPLACER test approximately 17 years ago (Teacher 1). When I asked this teacher about the reasoning behind choosing the test, she related that the research director at the time made the decision to use ACCUPLACER on his own, without consulting faculty, and he was “surprised when the faculty were not happy with him” for making this decision without their input (Teacher 1).

According to the College Board (the “not-for profit membership association” that developed the test), the ACCUPLACER online test uses “sophisticated technology” to provide accurate and efficient measurement of students’ knowledge and skills (“Coordinator’s Guide” 1). The test adapts to each test taker based on an “item selection algorithm” that tries to match the “skill level” of the student to the “skill level” of the questions (“Coordinator’s Guide” 1). The test first randomly selects a question level of “middle difficulty,” and if the student answers wrong, the test will “branch” to a group of easier questions, randomly chosen from a group of questions categorized as easier. If the student answers the first group of questions correctly, the test will “branch” to a set of more difficult questions as illustrated in Figure 1.

According to Teacher 1, this “branching” is a strength because it may keep students from getting frustrated and “just marking whatever.” The College Board maintains that “tailoring” the test to the skill level of the student not only “allows for accurate diagnosis of the student’s knowledge and skills” but also makes it possible to use fewer test questions than “are typically required in traditional ‘paper and pencil’
Fig. 1. Test branching.


tests” (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ Coordinator’s Guide” 1). Two criteria are used to determine the students’ scores: number of correct answers and the difficulty level of the correct answers. In addition, the College Board points out that because each student’s testing experience is different, “this eliminates problems of students exchanging information about answers . . .” (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ Coordinator’s Guide” 1).

The Willowbrook “cut-off” scores for reading placement are based on the reading comprehension portion of the test which contains five content areas designed to
“measure a student’s ability to understand what he or she has read” (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ Technical Manual” A17):

- Identifying main ideas
- Direct statements/secondary ideas
- Inferences
- Applications
- Sentence Relationships

Students answer 20 questions of two different types. One type consists of either a short or long reading passage followed by a question about the text. This type of question may also be categorized “according to the kind of information processing required, including explicit statements related to the main idea, explicit statements related to a secondary idea, application, and inference”( The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ “Technical Manual” A17). The other type of question is designed to measure the student’s ability to discern sentence relationships. It “presents two sentences followed by a question about the relationship between these two sentences” (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ “Technical Manual” A17). It may ask whether the second sentence supports, contradicts or repeats the information in the first sentence (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ “Technical Manual” A17). The College Board also points out that the content of the material is “varied” according to “categories” including “social sciences, natural and physical sciences, human relations, practical affairs and the arts” in an effort to prevent test “bias” because of a student’s background knowledge, or lack thereof (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ “Technical Manual” A18).
The College Board explains that the “Reading Comprehension test measures a student’s ability to understand what he or she has read,” and their “Technical Manual” outlines five content areas and the “approximate percentage” that they appear on the test: identifying main ideas (12-25%), direct statements and secondary ideas (12-40%), inferences (12-40%), applications (12-25%), and sentence relationships (24-29%)(A17).

In addition, The College Board has isolated specific “knowledge and skills” that correspond to scores. These are explicitly stated on page A-18 of their “ACCUPLACER™ OnLine Technical Manual.” The following is from the manual:

**Proficiency Statements for Reading Comprehension**

**Total Right Score of about 51**
Students at this level are able to comprehend short passages that are characterized by uncomplicated ideas, straightforward presentation, and for the most part, subject matter that reflects everyday experience. These students are able to:
- Recognize the main idea and less central ideas
- Recognize the tone of the passage when questions do not require fine distinctions
- Recognize relationships between sentences, such as the use of one sentence to illustrate another.

**Total Right Score of about 80**
Students at this level are able to comprehend short passages that are characterized by moderately uncomplicated ideas and organization. These students are able to:
- Answer questions that require them to synthesize information, including gauging point of view and intended audience.
- Recognize organizing principles in a paragraph or passage
- Identify contradictory or contrasting statements

**Total Right Score of about 103 or higher**
Students at this level are able to comprehend passages that, although short, are somewhat complex in terms of the ideas conveyed, and that deal with academic subject matter, often in a theoretical framework. These students are able to:
- Extract points that are merely implied
- Follow moderately complex arguments or speculations
- Recognize tone
- Analyze the logic employed by the author in making an argument. (The College Board, “ACCUPLACER™ Technical Manual” A19)
Both the institutional researcher and Teacher 1 described the placement test validation process that Willowbrook College engages in every three years. The researcher related that he has never participated in the reading “cut-off” score validation, but Teacher 1 has participated several times. The reviews consist of a faculty survey where they are asked to evaluate their students’ abilities in two categories: 1) is the student succeeding in class? and 2) where is the student performing in relation to the rest of the class? (below, at, or above the average class level?). In addition, the same set of students is also given a survey about their class performance. According to the institutional researcher, there is typically a .7 to .8 correlation between faculty and student surveys, which he says is “pretty high.” The results of these surveys are analyzed and used to adjust the cut-off scores; however, the researcher pointed out that so far, only the faculty surveys have been used to adjust scores.

The Reading Teachers

The following account synthesizes the information gathered from several of the Willowbrook reading teachers, including the former program chair who has recently retired. It includes the data gathered from interviews as well as information gleaned from the minutes of weekly RPRC meetings. Using this data, I paint a collective view of the reading program from the perspectives of the reading teachers. Of course, all comments and observations made by one teacher are not necessarily shared by all of the teachers, and I will do my best to point out differences of opinion where appropriate.

Although one of the teachers maintains that the goal of the reading program “should be to edify one’s soul,” most of the instructors agree that the institutional goal is to help students who test below “college level” in reading to obtain the reading and study
skills that they need in order to succeed in college and in their subsequent careers. The current program is described by teachers as a hierarchy of four developmental classes designed to take student cohorts of relatively homogeneous “skill levels,” starting “as low as a second or third grade,” all the way to “college level.” The common hope is that after successfully completing this “ladder of remediation,” students will be able to “take any content class and understand the text for that class. . . .If they take basic reading classes first, they should be able to go into any class and apply those skills” (Reading Program Review Committee 10/1/10).

One instructor described how every student entering the college takes a mandatory placement test, and students who test “below college level” in reading are encouraged (but not required), to take one or more of the four developmental reading courses—Reading 1, 2, 3, or 4. For example, students who tests into the lowest level are encouraged to take all four semesters of developmental reading, but students who test into the highest level are recommended to take only one course. Although developmental reading courses are not required, students who elect to take reading courses are not allowed to take a reading course above their prescribed level until they successfully complete all levels that the placement test says they need.

I asked several reading instructors about the content of these courses, and despite slight variations, they all generally agree that each level of reading addresses slightly different “skill sets” and “strategies” which students are asked to learn and apply to various readings. Many of these reading skills and strategies are revisited in each level, and new strategies and skills are covered as students progress through the levels. The readings at the lowest level seem to focus mostly on narrative, while those in other levels
tend to be mostly expository in nature (except that the Reading 3 level usually reads a “young adult” novel in addition to the expository excerpts), often excerpts from reading textbooks that are designed to cover various content areas. All of the teachers agree that the readings at each ascending level use more “sophisticated language” than previous levels, and all of the instructors that I spoke with felt that these readings could be loosely categorized in terms of grade level. The lowest level, Reading 1, reads material at anywhere from the third grade to about sixth grade levels, and the next class up, Reading 2, uses materials at fourth through eighth grade levels. The Reading 3 class uses readings at about ninth through twelfth grade, and the Reading 4 class uses what is considered “college level” reading materials. The exact skills and strategies covered seem to vary slightly from teacher to teacher, but Figure 2 is a synthesis (from three different teachers) of the skills and strategies covered in each level.

Teacher 1 described the reading classes offered at the college as well as two different “pilot programs” that she tried (one that she considers successful and one that she does not consider successful). During the time that this teacher was the program chair, the Reading 1 and Reading 2 both used the same book. She explained that the first half of the book is covered in Reading 1 and the second half of the book is covered in Reading 2. However, in speaking to other teachers, the practice of using the same book for the first two levels has changed in some instances, and currently different teachers may choose different texts. Teacher 1 explained that students in Reading 1 do “a lot of vocabulary work . . . and a lot of dictionary work, and they also write brief summaries of what they’ve read, finding main ideas.” The Reading 2 class reviews a bit of what was covered in Reading 1, and then moves on to identifying text patterns, outlining and
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Fig. 2. Skills and strategies.

mapping texts. Inference and critical reading are also covered in Reading 2. This instructor further explained that the content of Reading 3 is very much like the material of Reading 2, but “the material is longer and harder.” “If we were to assign a grade level, the materials for Reading 2 are usually somewhere around fourth through seventh or eighth grade and the materials in Reading 3 are about ninth through twelfth grade.” According to this instructor, the Reading 3 final exam consists of two parts: a selection of text material, usually four to five pages, with true/ false objective questions (“and that is always at twelfth grade level, whether it comes from an actual textbook or not”), and
they also have to map or outline a memorized selection (four to five pages) of material that they read ahead of time. Students are prepared for this second half of the final in class, they discuss the reading, work with the vocabulary and text patterns, and they practice mapping or outlining the material ahead of time.

This instructor explained that Reading 4 is considered “college level” reading, and it is degree applicable, although not required and not transferrable. Students can satisfy the reading requirement by passing English 1A, a required course for all students. Reading 4 is the only reading class that can count towards the Associates Degree. The final exam for Reading 4 consists of a 20-page chapter that students read and study ahead of time, and during the final they must write a “content essay” from memory, which basically paraphrases main ideas and major details for part of the chapter (they do not know which part until they get there). Students are not supposed to add any of their own ideas or comments in this “essay.” The second part of the Reading 4 final entails reading an essay with an implied thesis (“of about the English 3 level,” which is the level just before English 1A). The students are asked to write an outline of all the main points as well as state the thesis. They don’t actually have to write the summary because, as this instructor states, “We decided to move away from having them write an actual summary, because it seemed like too many of them got hung up on the writing . . . but we figured that’s somebody else’s [problem] . . . ”

As mentioned previously, Teacher 1 explained that she also experimented with two “pilot” reading courses. Pilot courses are used at Willowbrook to test new course designs in order to see if they are effective. The reasoning behind these courses was to provide students in content courses context-specific reading instruction in order to
help them with the specific needs of their content classes. The teacher described one of these experimental courses as successful, but the other was decidedly not successful.

The experimental reading course that this reading instructor considered successful was the reading for Biology A class: Reading A. She taught this class for four semesters, and according to this instructor, as well as data gathered by the institutional researcher, this class was fairly successful. The idea was to create a reading class that was connected to a specific content course, using the material from the syllabus of the biology course as material for the reading class. Biology A is a large lecture course with an approximately 50% dropout rate (Teacher 1). It is a required course for students who want a degree in nursing and other health related majors, and many who fail or drop out will try again. The reading instructor who taught this pilot course repeatedly emphasized the importance of communication and cooperation between the reading teacher and the content teacher. She explained that the semester after the original biology teacher retired, the student success statistics “fell apart.” This teacher hypothesized that the students many not have been as successful because she and the new teacher did not have the same communicative and cooperative success. Although this one statistically insignificant semester brought the overall statistics for this class below the “significant level,” both the instructor who taught the class and the institutional researcher would advocate replicating this model.

The other experimental class that this instructor attempted was described as “not successful.” This pilot reading course also tried to teach reading within the context of a discipline—auto mechanics. According to the teacher, the difficulty seemed to be that it was not connected to one specific class, but tried to address the general reading,
vocabulary, and study strategy needs of the discipline as a whole. The instructor related that it was difficult finding a common text to use because all of the texts were quite diverse. In addition, the students were at different levels in the program, “some just beginning and some almost ready to graduate” (Teacher 1). Although the idea of a general, domain-specific reading class seems like it would be a valid idea, according to Teacher 1, it is much more effective to connect the reading class to one syllabus of a specific course. In this way, the reading material can be the actual reading that the students need to do for the class, thereby making the class much more relevant for the student’s immediate needs.

The Institutional Researcher

The following information was collected during an interview with the Willowbrook College institutional researcher. I asked him a variety of questions about the reading program in an effort to find out more about the placement test and the overall efficacy of the program. He gave me data on testing and placement for fall 2010, student success in the Program, Reading 4 student success in English 1A, and Reading A student success in Biology A.

Every student entering Willowbrook College takes a placement test in reading, English and math. According to data that the researcher obtained from the testing specialist, 3,014 students were tested in the fall of 2010. This data includes the main campus as well as two other locations. The testing began on February 1 and continued until August 23, 2010. The reading placement results for this period is shown in Table 1.
### Table 1
Placement Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Reading Score “cut-offs”</th>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Total class seats offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading 1</td>
<td>&lt; 44</td>
<td>4 14 students</td>
<td>120 seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading 2</td>
<td>&gt;= 44 &lt; 56</td>
<td>202 students</td>
<td>120 seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading 3</td>
<td>&gt;= 56 &lt; 71</td>
<td>765 students</td>
<td>90 seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading 4 (considered college level)</td>
<td>&gt;= 71 &lt; 82</td>
<td>486 students</td>
<td>60 seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reading course needed.</td>
<td>&gt;= 82</td>
<td>1, 147 students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced by Table 1, a total of 1,867 students tested into reading courses in the fall of 2010—approximately 6.19% of all students tested—yet we only offer two to four sections of each reading level, leaving many students without the reading courses that the placement test indicates they need.

Additionally, Willowbrook’s institutional researcher studied a cohort of students as they progressed through the reading program over a six-year period. He charted student success rates (students who completed each course with a “C” or better), comparing the students who started at each ascending level. The reading competency graduation requirement is met by passing either Reading 4 or English 1A with a “C” or better, so he also looked at the number of students in the reading program who successfully completed English 1A. Table 2 illustrates his findings (percentages are approximate as they were interpreted visually from a graph). As illustrated in Table 2, not
very many students who take reading at our college end up successfully meeting the reading graduation requirement. The lower the students start in the hierarchy of classes, the less likely they are to successfully complete English 1A.

Despite the attrition and failure rates for the program as a whole, the researcher did find a positive correlation between students who make it through Reading 4 and subsequent success in English 1A. The population for his analysis included all students who took English 1A over a period of six years. He compared the success rates of students who took Reading 4 (79.9% success) before English 1A with the success of all English 1A students (73.6%). However, he does point out that the data for the English 1A success rate includes the Reading 4 students. Although the results were shy of statistical significance, he feels that his research shows that there is some value to taking Reading 4 before taking English 1A.
In addition to analyzing student success in the traditional Reading Program, the researcher also studied the experimental Reading A course. He compared the success rates of Biology A students taking Reading A (57%) with the success rates of students not taking the reading course (51.5%) from fall of 2007 through the spring of 2010. This was a 5.5% difference and, according to the researcher, it was not quite significant, but he feels that it was close enough to make this pilot “worth it.” Willowbrook’s researcher also pointed out that the results were significant for about four terms, but the second-to-last term did not produce very good results. As indicated in a previous section, this might be explained by the retirement of the Biology teacher. The institutional researcher related that, based on his research of this experimental program, the cost of adding a course like this would most likely be worth it because of the potential to increase student success rates in content areas.

A Willowbrook Counselor

The counselor that I interviewed has been at Willowbrook College for more than thirty years and will be retiring soon. Her perspective is valuable not only because of her longevity at Willowbrook, but because of her interaction with the students, which is different from a teacher’s. I asked her several questions about the placement test and the current reading program, and I also asked her for feedback on ideas for the future design of the reading program.

The placement test, in this counselor’s experience, is not always accurate for students who take the test at the high schools. She explained that most of these students take the ACCUPLACER test at their high schools during the spring of their senior year, and they do not take it as seriously as they should. In addition, sometimes there is a
problem with time constraints because of the school schedule, but students are supposed
to have as much time as they need to take the test. This counselor also related that she
often sees students who are in honors classes at the high school getting low test scores,
and they are not allowed to re-take the test for at least thirty days. Often by the time they
get to the college in the fall, there is not time to re-take the test; therefore, students are
stuck with the level that they tested into the previous spring, and once students take a
class at a certain level, they cannot re-take the placement test in order to be placed at a
higher level. Overall, according to this counselor, the testing done at the high schools,
because of the environment and disposition of the students, is not very accurate. In
addition to improving the testing environment, she would advocate that students do a bit
of test preparation before they take the test, which might increase its accuracy.

This counselor also expressed that she is not very happy with the design of the
current reading program. First, there are not enough reading classes offered for all of the
students who need classes; she commented that in the fall of 2010, all of the reading
classes were full. In addition, because of the “stigma” attached to reading classes, she
feels that it is difficult to talk students into taking reading. This counselor explained that
when she is showing the students the different reading courses, Reading 1, Reading 2,
Reading 3 and Reading 4, the students feel that the titles imply “that this is reading for
dummies,” and she thinks that it would be helpful if we changed the names. We should
“call them something other than reading” because most of these students know how to
read; they just need help with comprehension. She related that when students test into
reading, they often ask “do I have to take it?” and she is obligated to tell them no— if
they pass English 1A, their reading requirement will be taken care of. Moreover, for the
purposes of financial aid, students are only allowed to take 30 units of remedial courses, and if a reading course is not required, they are less likely to spend their allowed units on it. She suggests that it might be a good idea to change the approach so that students can more easily see the benefits of the classes, and she goes on to give some interesting suggestions for the improvement of the program.

This counselor pointed out that she would rather see one-half-unit or one-unit reading classes to go along with other content courses than general, four-unit classes because reading classes that would help them with specific reading in the content courses would be seen as “more valuable and less stigmatized.” She went on to explain that she doesn’t “think we need levels” because students of all levels are already taking the content courses. Her idea is to make these classes repeatable, so the students who need more time can take them again, but those who are successful can move on. “We need to realize that because there are no pre-requisites on courses like Political Science, then we cannot stop underprepared students from taking these classes.” This counselor further expressed that, “we can either let them fail, or we can figure out a way to help them.”

In addition to making the existing reading courses more relevant and helpful to the student’s immediate needs, she also suggested that we add a speed reading course in order to help students learn how to get through their studies in less time. She has found that the students who attend Willowbrook have complicated lives with work, families to care for, and other obligations, and they often simply cannot find enough time in their day to study; therefore, she expressed that a speed reading class might help them succeed.

This counselor pointed out that “reading is number one—it is the most important skill that students need in order to succeed in college, before writing and before
Therefore, she maintained that it is very important for us to figure out how our reading program can reach more students. If we can help all of the students who need help with reading, then our college will most likely see a dramatic improvement in student success rates.

The Textbooks: Reading 1 and Reading 2

Until the fall 2010 semester, the two lowest level classes generally used the same textbook; the first half of the book was covered in Reading 1 and (after a bit of review) the second half was covered in Reading 2. Up until the fall 2010 semester, the common text for these levels was *Essential Reading Skills* by Kathleen T. McWhorter, but in most classes, the book for this level was recently changed to *Groundwork for College Reading: with Phonics* by Bill Broderick and John Langan. Excerpts from both books are below.

*Essential Reading Skills* by Kathleen T. McWhorter

The preface of the teacher’s edition reads:

*Essential Reading Skills* is designed to improve students’ reading and thinking skills through concise skill instruction, extensive guided practice, assessment, and feedback. It was written to provide students at both two- and four-year colleges with a foundation of reading and thinking skills that will enable them to successfully handle their college courses. The text offers brief strategies for and extensive application of the reading skills essential to college success: active reading and thinking, vocabulary development, literal and critical comprehension, and information organization. (McWhorter xiii)

The book has 11 chapters:

1. Reading Actively
2. Using your Dictionary
The first chapter, “Reading Actively” begins with the heading “Starting with a Positive Attitude” and declares that “college students need to be positive about their courses and what they read” because this disposition is “a key to college success and success on the job” (McWhorter 1). The chapter then gives several bulleted points offering advice such as “visualize success” and “set long-term goals” (1). It then offers an exercise to help students understand the difference between “helpful” or “not helpful” statements. The directions ask the students to write an “H” next to helpful statement and a “NH” next to not helpful ones. The statements include:

- This assignment is boring; I don’t know why we have to read about World War I.
- Whenever I imagine myself taking a test, I see myself getting nervous and my mind going blank.
- I worked really hard and finished all of my assignments tonight. I think I’ll celebrate by meeting Janie for Chinese food. (McWhorter 3)

The next section of the chapter introduces “previewing” and illustrates how to preview by giving a list of what to preview (title, subtitle, section headings, first
paragraph and so on) and then demonstrating the process using a sample text called “Functions of Eye Communication.” The text models which sections should be previewed by highlighting specific parts of the text. Next, students are asked to answer true/false questions about the information that they previewed, complete an exercise answering multiple choice questions about a hypothetical psychology assignment. Then they are asked to match items in two columns to assess whether they understand the functions of various text parts such as the title, sections headings, and the first paragraph. The chapter continues with several more activities and exercises designed to teach “active” reading strategies.

*Groundwork for College Reading: With Phonics* by Bill Broderick and John Langan

Although this text is similar to *Essential Reading Skills* in many respects, it gives more emphasis to the linguistic dimensions by including a section in the beginning on phonics and word parts. It is divided into the three sections outlined in Figure 3.

On page one, the following sub-heading appears: “How to become a Better Reader and Thinker,” and the first sentence reads, “The chances are that you are not as good a reader as you should be to do well in college” (Broderick and Langan 1). The passage goes on to blame “a culture where people watch” too much television and do not spend enough time reading. Broderick and Langan point out that “people who do not read very often are not likely to be strong readers” (1). The authors then give several possible reasons for weak reading skills including other “responsibilities,” unpleasant school experiences, and not enjoying the reading content. The result of these reasons, as the
Part I
Phonics and Word Parts

- Consonants
- Vowels
- Syllables
- Word Parts

Part II
Ten Steps to College Reading

- Getting started
- Dictionary use
- Vocabulary in Context
- Main Ideas
- Supporting Details
- Finding Main Ideas
- Signal Words I
- Signal Words II
- Inferences
- The Basics of Argument

Part III
Five Reading Sections

- Various readings for practice

Fig. 3. Book sections.

The authors point out, is that students “may have concluded that reading in general is not for [them]” (1).

Part I begins with an introduction to phonics, explaining that it is “a very helpful method” for learning how to pronounce words. “What you should do is look at the word, break it into syllables, sound out each syllable, and put the word back together again” (9). The authors are careful to qualify this advice with the following statements: “It is true that English letters don’t always sound the way you expect them to. But phonics can help you figure out the sounds of most words. And when phonics isn’t enough, you can use a dictionary” (9).

The phonics chapter carefully explains the various letter sounds, made by individual letters and combinations of letters and then assesses student comprehension of this information using a multiple choice exercise at the end. The directions and three sample questions from this exercise are as follows:
Phonics Questions
Use Phonics clues you learned from this chapter to answer the following questions. In the space provided, write the letter of your choice for each question.
1. Which word from the sentence below has a consonant digraph?
   A. Thirty
   B. Old
   C. Mexico
   “I am thirty years old, and I was born in Mexico.” (Paragraph 1)
2. The word alcoholic, used in the sentence below, contains
   A. Two soft c sounds
   B. A hard c sound and a soft c sound
   C. Two hard c sounds.
   “My father was an alcoholic, and he left my family and me when I was three years old.” (Paragraph 2)
3. The word grew, used in the sentence below contains
   A. a soft g sound
   B. a hard g sound
   “My curiosity grew, and one day I stopped them on their way back home.” (Paragraph 5)
4. The word spent, used in the sentence below contains
   A. two consonant blends
   B. two consonant digraphs
   C. one consonant blend and one consonant digraph.
   “My relatives spent the money that my mother sent me.” (Paragraph 3). (Broderick and Langan 32)

Reading 4

Bridging The Gap: College Reading
by Brenda D. Smith

The textbook for the highest level (Reading 4) contains twelve chapters. Six of the chapters contain “longer reading selections” designed to “reflect common knowledge that lies at the core of each academic area” which are “an important part of the shared cultural heritage of educated thinkers” (inside front cover). The authors maintain that this will “arm students with prior knowledge and promote subsequent success in academic courses” (inside front cover). The chapter headings are:
The preface explains that the text intends not only to fill in the gaps between successful high school reading and what is needed for the more independent and challenging task of college reading and learning... [but also bridge] concept development by creating schemata for college content courses with academic readings... forming strong learning links by bridging new knowledge with prior knowledge. (Smith xix)

This text introduces the various skills and a strategy listed above and asks students to practice these skills and strategies by reading excerpts from college-level textbooks and then answering multiple choice questions that assess comprehension.

The first chapter, “Active Learning,” explains how cognitive psychologists have created models that describe how our brains work. The author gives brief overviews of the reticular activating system, the ability to attend to tasks, automatic attention,
cognitive styles, multiple intelligences, concentration, and “successful academic behaviors” (2-18). At the end of the first chapter, there are three reading selections: one about education, one about psychology, and one about health. Each reading selection contains pre-reading exercises designed to encourage “active learning” while reading.

The pre-reading questions from “selection 1” are:

**Skill Development: Active Learning**

Before reading the following selection, take a few minutes to analyze your active learning potential and answer the following questions.

1. **Physical Environment.** Where are you and what time is it?
2. **Internal Distractions.** What is popping into your mind and interfering with your concentration?
3. **Set Time goals.** How long will it take you to read the selection? To answer the questions?

Increase Word Knowledge. What do you know about these words? avid, clarity, Prodigy, oddity, Ridiculed, subverted, appropriately Arrogant, desperation, sullen Time Goal. Record your starting time for reading. (Smith 23-24)

The first reading selection, “Superman and Me” is a literacy narrative by Native American writer Sherman Alexie, and at the end of the excerpt students are asked to record their finishing time, rate their concentration level, recall what they have read and respond in writing to what they have read. In addition, there are multiple choice and true/ false comprehension questions as well as multiple choice vocabulary questions. The comprehension questions also note (in red) the category, letting students know whether the question is assessing main idea, inference or detail. The first three sample questions are:

**Check Your Comprehension**

After reading the selection, answer the following questions with a, b, c, or d. In order to help you analyze your strengths and weaknesses, the question types are indicated.

Main Idea - 1. Which is the best statement of the main idea of this selection?
   a. Storytelling rather than reading is valued in Indian culture.
   b. Life on an Indian reservation is viewed negatively by the non-Indian world
c. Comic books should be used to introduce children to reading.
d. Books can be a salvation.

Inference - 2. The author’s love of books developed primarily because
a. the teachers at his school encouraged reading.
b. his father loved books.
c. he was often bored and not allowed to play.
d. his brothers and sisters read to him.

Detail - 3. The author’s father read
a. only fiction.
b. only nonfiction
c. mostly comic books
d. both fiction and nonfiction. (Smith 28)

The purpose of the above description of the data is to lay a foundation for the
analysis to come in the next chapter. As mentioned previously, my intention was to
describe Willowbrook’s reading program from several viewpoints using various opinions
from Willowbrook employees as well as data from the placement test and textbooks. The
impetus for the data collection was the goal of understanding the current Reading
Program in order to evaluate it in light of current reading theories and then to use that
analysis to recommend a future Reading Program design. In Chapter V, I will use the
data outlined in this chapter to explore the underlying theoretical assumptions of the
current Reading Program and then determine how well they meet the needs of
Willowbrook’s reading students.
CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

Theories that reduce learning to individual mental capacity/activity . . . blame marginalized people for being marginal. Common theories of learning begin and end with individuals. . . Such theories are deeply concerned with individual differences, with notions of better and worse, more and less learning, and with comparison of these things across groups-of-individuals. (149)

Jean Lave

“Teaching, as Learning, in Practice.” Mind, Culture, and Activity

As discussed throughout this study, the goal is to design the most effective Reading Program possible for Willowbrook College. So far, this study has reviewed current and relevant literature in the field of reading, outlined the method of study, and described the data. This chapter analyzes the data, triangulating it with current reading and literacy theory. The goals of this analysis include discovering the underlying theoretical assumptions of the current reading program and illustrating how these assumptions are manifested in the program design; comparing these assumptions with the findings of prominent reading theorists; assessing how well the current program meets the reading needs of Willowbrook’s students, and finally, recommending the optimal Reading Program design for Willowbrook College.
A Part to Whole Process

An analysis of the data reveals that the Willowbrook Reading Program is based on a theory of reading development that views learning to read as a “part-to-whole process” (Kucer 295)—students must incrementally build linguistic and cognitive skills as they “climb the ladder” of reading remediation. However, as mentioned in the literacy review, Allington and Cunningham assert that defining reading acquisition as “a hierarchy of increasingly complex skills” is a “faulty assumption” (qtd in Mueller XVII). Indeed, many reading experts agree that reading development does not unfold in a stair-step-like manner, but is a recursive process involving simultaneous linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural negotiations within a complex web of language systems. Nevertheless, reading teacher descriptions of the classes (via meeting discussions and interviews), and samples of the textbooks reveal evidence of an incremental, linear approach to reading development.

During Reading Program Committee (RPRC) meetings, members discussed the possibility of somehow combining reading classes or reducing the number of levels, and although some of the reading teachers felt that the third and fourth levels could be combined, most were adamantly opposed to combining the two lower levels. One day, while in the middle of an RPRC discussion about combining Reading 1 and Reading 2, I asked a reading teacher (who had just finished expressing his opposition to this idea) the following question: “So, you see reading development as a skill-building, step-by-step process?” He became visibly and audibly disconcerted and replied, clapping his hands together for emphasis:
Of course! One by one they must learn these skills: phonics, syllabification, morphology, dictionary use (I will prove to you that they don’t even know how to use a dictionary!), word parts, vocabulary, main ideas, supporting details . . . We cannot possibly cover everything for these two classes in one semester!

The design of the program is clearly based on an incremental approach to reading development, and unfortunately, this approach may actually hinder students because they are not given an opportunity to wield all of the language systems simultaneously within authentic contexts. The compiled chart of skills and strategies, (Figure 2), exemplifies this incremental approach. According to this chart (derived from teacher accounts), students begin with “phonics” in level one and end with “evaluating [the] author’s ideas” in level four. Of course, this does not mean that every reading instructor teaches all of these skills in this exact order, but the absence of phonics in level four, and the absence of the evaluation of the “author’s ideas” in level one tells me that there is an incremental design to the teaching of these skills. Additionally, level one learns how to make “simple inferences,” while levels two, three, and four make “inferences,” implying that only students at the higher levels are capable of make more than “simple” inferences. Only level four reading students “write essay responses” to texts which indicates that level one through three are not expected to engage in this kind of critical thinking.

The classes are set up in a staircase-like fashion, and students who begin at level one, are not allowed to skip any levels once they begin the sequence. If, however, they were to retake the placement test before they start the sequence, they may be able to start at a higher level— if they raise their score (Teacher 1). The problem with this approach is that students in the lower levels do not get an opportunity to practice “higher-
level reading activities [such as critical analysis or essay writing] that facilitate the
development of independent comprehending readers” (Mueller 36). This philosophy of
reading development seems to view the acquisition of reading competence as a process of
building skills in an incremental fashion, not unlike the laying of bricks.

The approach to reading development in the sample textbooks echoes the
brick laying approach evident in the skills and strategies chart, despite the fact that many
experts argue against this hierarchal skill-building pedagogy. The current level one and
two text begins by teaching students the sounds of the alphabet—this assumes that
students who test into the lowest level have difficulty with interpreting the
graphophonemic and morphemic linguistic systems. In other words, they need step-by-
step phonics instruction so that they can learn to decode texts. Part I of this text,
*Groundwork for College Reading: With Phonics* by Bill Broderick and John Langan,
covers consonants, vowels, syllables, and word parts, and Part II covers both more
linguistic concerns (such as signal words, and vocabulary) and cognitive strategies (such
as identifying main ideas and inferring). The organization of this textbook, moving from
surface level linguistic concerns at the beginning to deeper level meaning making
afterwards, illustrates a “bottom up” approach to reading development. According to
Kucer, this approach can be categorized as “decoding” (295). Theorists and practitioners
who subscribe to this approach view literacy acquisition as a building process—and the
base of the process is graphophonemics. According to this approach, the student first
masters the letters and their sounds and afterwards they can move on to morphemes (the
smallest units of meaning). The “decoding” philosophy assumes that students are not
ready to discern meaning from texts until they have first mastered these two skills, and
these “decoding” theorists see learning and teaching reading as a “deductive process” (Kucer 295). In contrast to this “decoding” pedagogy, many experts in the field contend that “literacy learning involves far more than the mere acquisition of graphophononic relations and orthographic knowledge” learners must be given ample opportunity to practice reading using all of the dimensions of literacy, not just the linguistic and/or cognitive dimensions (Kucer 249).

Martha Maxwell, an expert in the field of learning assistance and developmental education who taught at the University of Maryland and the University of California, Berkeley, asserted that despite “new theories and new research . . .[that have] changed our understanding of the reading process” many college reading programs have remained unchanged (11). Maxwell draws on the ideas of Nancy Wood who “explains that one result of the impact of traditional behaviorist theory on reading was that experts began to divide reading into skill and subskills under the belief that if students improved in the subskills they would become stronger readers. . .” (qtd. in Maxwell 12). The problem is that reading development does not progress in this “neat, tidy, linear, step-by-step” fashion (Kucer 249), and Maxwell emphatically asserts that “if developmental courses give students nothing important to read about and nothing to write about that remotely resembles college work—how can they hope to improve” (13)?

Up until the fall of 2010, Willowbrook’s level one and two reading classes used a different book, *Essential Reading Skills* by Kathleen T. McWhorter, as their primary textbook. This text, like *Groundwork for College Reading: with Phonics*, also displays a part-to-whole approach to reading development, but there is noticeably less emphasis on decoding. While very similar to what Kucer calls a “decoding” approach to
reading, this author appears to subscribe to what Kucer would call a “skills” approach—hence the title (295). This philosophy, like the “decoding” approach, views literacy development as a step-by-step process that builds like the laying of a brick wall. The difference is that “skill advocates” view morphemes and vocabulary at “the base for learning to read” (Kucer 296). Chapter titles like, “Building Vocabulary: Using Context Clues,” and “Building Vocabulary Using Word Parts” are clues that McWhorter’s text subscribes to the brick laying view of learning to read. The absence of the phonics chapter in *Essential Reading Skills* leads me to conclude that this author does not feel a need to include graphophonemic skills, at least for adult college students. According to Kucer, in both of these literacy theories the learner is “typically introduced” to cognitive and linguistic strategies and rules which they are then expected to be able to apply to all situations (296). The preface of *Essential Reading Skills* assures the teacher that the goal of the book is to “provide students at both two-and four-year colleges with a foundation of reading and thinking skills that will enable them to successfully handle their college courses” (xiii). The author goes on to list “active reading and thinking, vocabulary development, literal and critical comprehension, and information organization” as the skills that the students will learn (xiii). The assumption is that after the individual student obtains the “skills” they will then magically be able to “handle” college. Unfortunately, as it turns out, this is another faulty assumption.

**The Assumption of Transfer**

Almost every aspect of the current Willowbrook College Reading Program rests on the assumption that the skills and strategies learned in stand-alone classrooms
can be transferred to other reading contexts; however, “we now know that reading is discipline specific and skills learned in one genre may or may not transfer to other academic fields” (Maxwell 12). The premise of the placement test, the structure of the program, the approach of most teachers, and the textbooks all either implicitly or explicitly assume that students have the ability to transfer learned skills to various reading situations.

The placement test, which purports to accurately assess the reading skills of students, implicitly assumes that students are able to take out their tool-box of skills and apply them to isolated reading excerpts outside of a meaningful context. It assumes that if students are unable to demonstrate the application of these skills in the testing situation, then they have difficulty reading and must therefore need extra reading instruction. Conversely, students who are able to perform well on these isolated tasks are assumed to have all of the necessary reading “skills” needed to succeed in college.

The design of the program also implicitly assumes that students who master specific linguistic and cognitive reading skills and strategies (by taking the sequence of reading classes) can “go into any college class and be able to read the existing textbook for that class” (Reading Program Review Committee 10/1). The current design consists of entirely stand-alone reading classes, and although content specific courses have been experimented with, none of these courses have been permanently added to the program as of yet (Teacher 1).

Teacher 1 described how her Reading 4 students were required to apply the various skills and strategies learned in her reading classes to their content classes. They were required to try a different strategy every week and then turn in a log describing the
results. This teaching strategy indicates that Teacher 1 may not take “transfer” for granted because she was consciously trying to help her students apply what they learned in her classroom to other contexts. In addition, this same teacher’s experimentation with two different domain-specific reading classes indicates that she recognizes the value of learning how to read in different content domains. Other reading teachers at Willowbrook College, however, do not seem to recognize the possibility that students may not transfer skills learned in isolated reading classes to other contexts. Several comments during RPRC meetings suggest that many teachers assume that the skills will transfer easily. For example, when the RPRC was discussing the “ideal reading program” one teacher declared that “the ideal reading program [is] one that produces students that can read well enough to take the necessary content courses and reach their educational goals,” and she further asserted that “if [students] take the basic reading class first, they should be able to go into any class and apply those skills” (Reading Program Review Committee 10/1).

This generalized approach to reading instruction is understandable if we take a historical look at the field of reading. Timothy and Cynthia Shanahan, from the University of Illinois at Chicago, point out that because “we have spent a century of education beholden to this generalist notion of literacy learning,” reading development “is commonly viewed as a basic set of skills, widely adaptable and applicable to all kinds of texts and reading situations” (40-41). However, we now know that reading skills and processes do not easily and automatically transfer to all situations, especially the highly specialized skills needed for advanced reading and content domains (Holschuh and Aultman 124). According to Alexander, “knowledge is domain specific. That is, knowledge is seen as situational and is studied within a particular context” (qtd. in
Holschuh and Aultman (124). Researchers have found that because of the nature of comprehension, our ability to access and use specific types of knowledge and cognitive processes and strategies are context and domain specific. In order to illustrate why reading comprehension is context and domain specific, I will turn to Kucer’s model of the reading process.

Kucer maintains that, like all language use, reading begins with “the quest for meaning” (125). When trying to make meaning out of a text, the reader actively searches for relevant background knowledge stored in the Long Term Memory (LTM). Cognitive scientists call this web of knowledge the “schemata.” The schemata is a complex web of “information that represents the individuals’ past encounters with the world,” including both “objects, situations, and events as well as knowledge of processes,” such as how to study for a science test or how to make pancakes (Kucer 125). Every literacy event begins with the search for this knowledge, but if relevant knowledge cannot be found, comprehension will be difficult. The problem may not necessarily be a lack of knowledge, but the knowledge may be organized in such a way that it is not easily accessed within the context of the current literacy event (Kucer 126).

Reading is context-dependent partly because it “does not evolve within a communicative vacuum, devoid of situational and cultural supports and restrictions” (Kucer 127). Halliday describes context as “all aspects of the environment that have a direct bearing on the construction of meaning” (qtd. in Kucer 127). This includes the identity and self-efficacy of the reader, what is being read, how the reader feels about what is being read, what the reader believes about what is being read, why it is being read, the environment in which it is being read, and the role of other people involved in
the literacy event (e.g., teacher, author, peers). It has been discovered that knowledge is not a “fixed entity” but “fluid” in nature, and its fluidity allows knowledge to change from situation to situation (Kucer 128). Stankoff proposes that

In any language situation, the meanings and structures produced are not so much dependent on one’s “competence” as a reader as they are produced relative to the social context itself. As situations and perceptions change, so too will the knowledge available. This phenomenon occurs because in different contexts, different patterns of schemata are activated. (qtd. in Kucer 128)

Kucer further explains that the “transaction” between the context and the available background knowledge of the reader create “a register” which is a potential for meaning making (qtd. in Kucer 127). In other words, the register limits “which meanings and forms are most accessible during the reading process,” thereby determining what meanings can be created for the reader (127).

The stand-alone reading and study strategy classes at Willowbrook College create a decidedly different context than domain-specific content classes, and because these contexts are so different, the transference of skills learned in the reading classes to specific content classes is problematic. The reading materials used in the stand-alone reading classes consists of various non-related excerpts from either narrative or expository texts, usually found in the reading textbook or other supplemental materials, while the readings in content classes are usually focused on interrelated subjects and ideas within a specific domain, such as history, psychology, or biology. Practicing isolated reading skills in stand-alone reading classes using a hodge-podge of texts intended to mimic the texts found in various content domains is not nearly as effective as practicing reading skills in an authentic context where the student is motivated to make meaning out of the text in order to succeed in a required content class.
The Illusion of Levels

Despite the fact that the placement test does not assign students a reading grade level, but instead gives vague “proficiency statements” designed to inform educators of the students’ reading abilities, all of the teachers that I spoke to referred to approximate “grade levels” that correspond with the different classes. One teacher repeatedly made the point that “if we are going to take students who are reading at a 2nd or 3rd grade level all the way to college-level, we will need at least three or four levels of reading classes” (Reading Program Review Committee 10/15). Another teacher explained that students in the lower levels need to start by reading texts that use language at “lower levels of academic complexity” than the higher level students (Reading Program Review Committee 8/20). Public schools in this nation have a long history of using grade level equivalencies to describe reading ability, but the common processes used to determine a student’s grade level are not very reliable.

According to Kucer, readability formulas have several inherent flaws. For one, most are based on the words: “the difficulty of the piece is largely determined by the number of words in the passage that are predicted to be difficult for the reader” (Kucer 112). This difficulty may be predicted by the number of syllables; however, simply knowing the meanings of words is not enough to help readers understand a text because comprehension is a complex process. In addition, these formulas typically analyze the number of words and sentences as well as the length of sentences, but there are many aspects of a text that “contribute to its difficulty” which readability formulas do not take into account (Kucer 112). For instance, readability formulas cannot match the author’s language patterns to the individual reader’s language patterns; they do not match the
background knowledge of the author with the background knowledge of the reader; they
do not take into account how the text matches the illustrations; they do not determine “the
use of cumulative syntactic, semantic, or episodic sequences in the text,” nor do they take
into account the “syntactic complexity” within a sentence (Kucer 113–114). A long
sentence may be simple to decipher if the grammatical functions and phrases are familiar
and if the order of words and phrases are predictable for the reader (Kucer 113).

According to Kucer,

> a text is more than a series of words or sentences strung together. [It is a] complex
> hierarchy of interrelated ideas or chunks of meaning that form a unified whole, . . .
> [and] simple word and sentence counts cannot hope to capture the complexity of the
> ideas an author is attempting to convey; nor can these counts adequately predict a
> reader’s ability to build a unified whole from any particular piece of reading
> material. (113)

Using miscue analysis, Kucer demonstrates that two texts deemed to be of the same
“grade level” by readability formulas can vary significantly when it comes to difficulty.

In his illustration, the same reader produced vastly different qualities of miscues when
reading the two texts. The results were so dissimilar, that it was as if the two texts were
being read by two different people. In addition, although it is a “common educational
belief” that shorter texts are easier, this example cogently illustrates that this notion is not
always true (108–116). The implications of these realizations is that the placement test, if
the difficulty of the texts are based on readability formulas, is not likely to accurately
place all of these students in reading levels because the material used to test them may
have given them difficulty for a host of complex reasons.

Although the Reading 1 class consists of students who score less than 44
points on the placement test, and Reading 2 includes students who score between 44 and
56, the ACCUPLACER™ proficiency statements only describe students who score at approximately 51 points or above. Students who score between 51 and 80 points are deemed able to “comprehend short passages that are characterized by uncomplicated ideas, straightforward presentation, and for the most part, subject matter that reflects everyday experience” (The College board A18). How the test-makers determine “uncomplicated,” “straightforward,” and “everyday” remains a mystery, but Kucer would contend that the level of difficulty for each text will depend on many complex communicative relationships between the author and the reader. This includes similarities and differences between their respective language patterns, and similarities and differences between the content and organization of their respective schematas, among other things. The point is that because the test-makers have no way of assessing the complex cognitive qualities of each test taker, it is undoubtedly impossible to predict the difficulty level of the texts offered on the test, and therefore, judging a person’s reading ability based on 20 questions, whether or not they branch according to computer-generated predictions about the reader’s ability, seems flawed.

Both Alexander and Kucer agree that literacy development is a never-ending process for everyone. Depending on the content and organization of our schemata, certain genres or domains will be more or less difficult for any one individual. There are many six-year-olds interested in dinosaurs who can read and understand multi-syllabic scientific terms and names when it comes to the domain of dinosaurs because their interest and motivation to learn about these fascinating beasts has caused them to add plenty of well-organized knowledge to their schemata. The point is that literacy development is not a step-by-step process of general skill building, but a recursive
process of continuous development that takes place in “an ever widening range of contexts” (Kucer 249). Furthermore, proficiency in one domain does not mean that the learner will be proficient in all domains. For instance, I am extremely proficient when it comes to reading academic journals about literacy development, but I would be sorely challenged if I tried to read academic journals about physics—if I were to take an ACCUPLACER™ test that was based on questions about college-level physics texts, I may test far below college-level. Would this mean that I need to go back to the basics and learn reading skills in a step-by-step manner before I can grapple with those elusive physics texts? Or is it best to go ahead and grapple with the physics texts (hopefully with plenty of scaffolding from an experienced expert at reading physics) thereby learning by doing, building my knowledge about how to read physics texts in the process?

A wise colleague of mine said “it’s not so much a matter of levels as it is a matter of time.” Many developmental readers who test below college level simply need extra time and support in order to learn how to wield academic language because, for a host of complex reasons, these students do not come to us with well developed academic literacies. It is not because they are not intelligent or capable; in fact, treating developmental students like they are somehow at fault for not paying attention in school, or seeing them as less intelligent than those who are deemed “academically prepared,” will only exacerbate their difficulties.

The Rhetoric of Remediation

The Reading Program at Willowbrook College contains an underlying rhetoric of remediation. Language used by teachers, and textbooks reveals an oftentimes condescending tone, implying that the reading students are somehow deficient and need
to “catch up” so that they can be successful. The rhetoric suggests that the Reading Program needs to fix something that is broken or correct something that has gone wrong. Whether it is a lack of phonics, a lack of cognitive skills, a lack of vocabulary, or a lack of positive attitude, the approach seems to come from a stance that assumes something has gone terribly awry, and students need to get up to speed with skills that should have been learned long ago.

The Willowbrook Reading faculty’s focus on grade levels and levels of “academic complexity” implies a deficit model that views adult students as having literacy skills equivalent to children in grammar school. This deficit model implicitly assumes that these students somehow failed to learn the “basic skills” that they need in order to read at the “college level,” and the hierarchy of reading courses is designed to help them gain these skills in a “back to basics” step-by-step fashion. This deficit model places blame on the individual, not on the society or educational system, and the approach to literacy development often mirrors the pedagogical approaches that some of these students may have been experiencing in “pull-out” programs throughout their twelve years of public schooling. Many of these students have been struggling with reading for their entire lives, and they may have negative “self-schemas” when it comes to how they feel about their reading ability, and according to Holschuh and Aultman, these negative “thoughts and emotions” are usually “based on prior academic experiences” (125). The trouble is that a negative self-efficacy is likely to impede student learning, and the underlying rhetoric of remediation exacerbates the problem.

The level 1 and 2 texts both display language and exercises that are decidedly simplistic and condescending for adult college students, and given the likelihood that
these students may already have fragile “self-schemas” these texts (although well meaning) may simply pour salt into what could very well be deep emotional wounds—the humiliation of being labeled a remedial reader for your entire life!

McWhorter’s text cheerfully asserts on page one that the “key to college success” is a “positive attitude” and the exercises in the introduction assume that these struggling readers must not know the difference between “helpful” positive statements and “not helpful” negative statements; therefore, they need to practice discerning between them (3). Imagine being an adult who has struggled with reading for your entire life, and despite your fears, you muster the courage to try college, only to be placed in the lowest reading class. When you face the humiliation and walk through that door on the first day, the first “lesson” is how to tell if you are being “positive” or not. Can a person who has experienced years of difficulty in academic endeavors simply fix a shaky self-efficacy by merely putting a band-aid of “positive attitude” on it—because a textbook told them that they should? This kind of insensitivity and condescending content insults the intelligence of these students and does nothing to help them gain a positive attitude.

Similarly, Broderick and Langan’s text assumes that students need to learn how to read words by learning phonics, thereby putting an emphasis on being able to speak the words rather than understand them. The authors give careful, but patronizing, instructions for learning how to read. “What you should do is look at the word, break it into syllables, sound out each syllable, and put the word back together again”(9). This is a college reading textbook, and although some ESL students may have difficulty with the sounds of the alphabet (especially if their home language uses a different graphophonemic system), most adults are far beyond a need for phonics instruction, and
to be forced to learn, and be tested on, our complicated (and unreliable) graphophonemic system is insulting and a waste of time for most. If ESL students should need to learn these basic sounds, this is a language acquisition issue and should not be confused with gaining proficiency in meaning making. Condescending language in the textbook does little to promote a positive self-efficacy in students, yet a student’s self-efficacy has been shown to impact learning and motivation. As one of the counselors at Willowbrook College points out, many students opt out of the reading program simply because of the stigma that is attached to college reading classes: the students are reluctant to take a course that seems like “reading for dummies” (Counselor Interview).

This rhetoric of remediation can also affect teacher expectations. If a new reading teacher expects her class of Reading 1 students to be at the same reading level as ten-year-old children, she may be in danger of entering her class with pre-conceived notions of what her students are capable of. Paul Eggen and Don Kauchak authors of *Educational Psychology: Windows on Classrooms*, quote Stipek who asserts that

> [t]eacher expectations about students’ learning can have profound implications for what students actually learn. Expectations affect the content and pace of the curriculum, the organization of instruction, evaluation, instructional interactions with individual students, and many subtle and not-so-subtle behaviors that affect students’ own expectations for learning and thus their behavior. (397)

Teachers should strive to maintain a metacognitive awareness of their beliefs and expectations concerning what they think their students can and cannot do, and they should also keep in mind that students need to be challenged in order to increase their motivation for learning (Eggen and Kauchak 402).

Mueller, who studies and works with adolescent “at risk” readers, asserts that “we need to blend psychological and social determinants into our understanding of
reading failure” and she quotes Kos who gives four factors for reading difficulty: “(1) their inability to use reading strategies effectively, (2) their perception of reading instruction, (3) stress related to reading, and (4) individual educational histories” (XVIII). Simply getting “back to basics” and assuming that students will be able to make meaning if they can only master an isolated set of skills is not good enough. Teachers must be mindful of the underlying attitudes and implicit messages hidden within the language that we use. We must strive to create learning environments that acknowledge and honor the wealth of knowledge and experiences that students bring into the classroom. We must challenge our students and let them know with both our actions and our words that they are capable, intelligent adults who bring a rich and valuable understandings of the world into our classrooms. We must strive to see them for who they truly are and seek to discover their unique talents and strengths, showing them how to use their talents and strengths to claim their rightful place in the academic community. We must resist the temptation to limit them based on what one out-of-context, twenty-question reading test deems they are capable of.

Attrition and Failure

Willowbrook’s Reading Program, like all of its developmental course sequences, has a dismal student success rate. Out of every hundred students that begin the Reading Program at the Reading 1 level, only eight of them will successfully complete English 1A—a course that is required for graduation. Although this success rate improves as we examine students who begin at higher levels, the percentage of students placed into reading courses who successfully complete English 1A never tops 35%
(Institutional Researcher). In other words, most students who take developmental reading at Willowbrook never graduate from community college. Of course, we cannot infer a cause-effect relationship between the attrition and failure rates and the reading classes because there are many reasons that students fail or drop out— but it seems clear that something is not working. Indeed similar attrition and failure rates are recorded for reading, math, English, and ESL developmental classes all over the United States. On a national level, the more developmental classes students are required to take, the less chance the students have of eventual academic success (qtd. in Hern 1). A Math instructor at Los Medanos College in California has dubbed this “exponential attrition” phenomenon “the multiplication principle” (Hern 20).

Katie Hern, an English instructor at Chabot College in California, has reported astounding success using a seemingly counter-intuitive solution—shorten the sequence. Yes, the English Department at Chabot has dramatically increased their student success rates in integrated writing and reading courses by shortening the developmental sequence—and the shorter the sequence, the higher the success rate! Hern explains that although this model “goes against our whole way of understanding developmental education,” which is to provide “lower levels of the curriculum [in order to] better prepare students for the demands of the next course,” compelling students to take “2, 3, [or] 4 semesters of developmental instruction is actually harmful because it reduces students’ chances of completing the transfer course so dramatically” (3). Interestingly, Chabot offers two choices: one is a developmental sequence of two integrated reading and writing courses that lead into the transfer level course, and the other is only one integrated course that leads directly into the transfer level course. All students, regardless
of their placement scores, are welcome to self-place into either one of these options, and students (regardless of placement scores) who opt for the fastest route to the transfer course are twice as likely to succeed (Hern 4). I wholeheartedly agree with Hern when she contends that “as a field, we need to become much more skeptical of the idea that placement scores = number of semesters of remediation needed” (9). Chabot, like Willowbrook, uses the ACCUPLACER™ placement test, and although their approach is different because they integrate their reading and writing courses (instead of keeping them separate), we might learn from comparing their student success rates with Willowbrook’s.

Although Chabot does not offer separate reading classes, like Willowbrook, it is nonetheless revealing to compare Chabot’s developmental English (integrated reading and writing) student success rates with the success rates of students at Willowbrook who had similar ACCUPLACER™ scores. It is important to note that the following information from Hern’s study was compiled using a similar (but slightly different) cut-score formula as compared to Willowbrook’s English placement cut-scores. The Willowbrook English scores weight the reading score as 2/3 (.67) and the sentence score as 1/3 (.33) of the total English placement score. The formula used in the following example from Chabot weighs the reading score as .65 and the sentence score as .35 (Hern 8). Students at Willowbrook who score 54 or less on their English placement test are mandated to take the lowest level English class (there are four levels before English 1A). Students at Chabot who score a 49 or lower on their ACCUPLACER™ test have an option (along with all other students) to self-place into the one semester integrated reading and writing developmental class, and of those who do, 48% subsequently pass
the transfer level class, which might be compared with our Reading 1 students who must take four semesters of reading, but largely because of the “multiplication principle” only 8% pass the transfer level class (1A).

How do they do it? The philosophy of literacy development used in Chabot’s developmental writing and reading classes does not view academic literacy acquisition as a step-by-step laying of knowledge bricks. Students in the developmental classes are asked to grapple with the “skills and habits of mind” required in English 1A, using “concentrated practice.” Hern relates that “the shorthand for the principle is ’1A at all levels.’ In both the accelerated and two-semester tracks, students engage in the same types of work required in an English 1A class, but in an environment of greater scaffolding and support”(6). Imagine the elation and resulting positive self-efficacy that must result as students—who may have been told all of their lives that they are lacking and need remediation—pass English 1A in their first year of college. The results produced with a combination of “concentrated practice,” and the support of a teacher who believes in her students is astounding. Imagine the confidence and vigor these students will carry into their subsequent academic and lifetime careers—clearly it is time to re-think Willowbrook’s approach to developmental reading.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Literacy has no effects—indeed, no meaning—apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts. (59)

J.P. Gee
Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses

Conclusions

Willowbrook’s Reading Program, in spite of noble intentions stemming from its designers’ sincere desire to help students, has become outdated. Its theoretical underpinnings reflect an understanding of literacy development that has not evolved with current research and best practice recommendations. Analysis of the program has revealed the following observations and conclusions about Willowbrook’s current Reading Program:

- The program seems to assume that reading development is a part-to-whole process that can be obtained in a step-by-step laying of knowledge bricks; however, research illustrates that reading development is a circuitous, recursive, and perpetually unfolding process of development within an ever-expanding mosaic of contexts—no matter a person’s educational attainment or reading placement exam score.
- The program is based on pedagogy that assumes reading development is a process whereby individuals acquire general linguistic and cognitive skills and strategies
that can be easily applied to any literacy event, but research shows that reading is a complex process that requires an ability to engage in not only linguistic and cognitive dimensions, but also sociocultural dimensions (Kucer 4), and the degree of reading proficiency varies according to experience within a context. The ability to make meaning out of texts is context and domain specific, and specific reading abilities will not necessarily transfer to all situations.

- The program contains an undercurrent of remediation rhetoric that threatens to stifle the hopes and dreams of its students with language and expectations that construct them as unintelligent, negative, or lacking. On the contrary, learning depends on an environment that fosters an optimistic self-efficacy. Fostering optimism is not achieved by merely pleading with students to be optimistic; fostering optimism is creating space for experiences of success with attainable challenges. This success helps students to realize how intelligent, capable, and brilliant they are—afterwards comes optimistic self-efficacy, followed by more evidence of brilliance.

- The program judges students’ reading abilities based on a twenty-question reading comprehension test, with questionable validity, and once students enter the hierarchy of developmental reading courses, they are locked into a long sequence of remediation. However, there is emerging evidence that puts the practice of mandating long sequences of developmental courses into question—some even assert that this practice is harmful because of the inevitable attrition that results (Hern).
Recommendations

The Willowbrook Reading Program needs to change its focus. Instead of offering a long sequence of developmental, stand-alone reading courses, the program should seek to connect reading to specific content courses. Reading is fundamental to college success, and if the process of reading development is recursive and context specific, then reading scaffolding should be offered recursively throughout a student’s college experience, giving them an opportunity to practice reading strategies in authentic, domain-specific contexts over and over again if they so choose. Many on the RPRC committee have expressed a strong desire to mandate reading classes “because students don’t always understand how valuable these courses can be for them” (RPRC minutes10/22), but I do not think that stand-alone reading courses should be mandated because it is my experience that intrinsic motivation for learning is much more powerful than extrinsic motivation. The reading program will have plenty of customers if the classes prove to be valuable to the success of struggling students—the word will get out, and teachers, counselors, and students will see the value of the reading classes. The program will grow organically.

First of all, Willowbrook should offer open-entry, optional, reading courses that are connected to content courses in the form of one-unit classes. These small classes, with a cap of fifteen students, should be taught by a reading instructor and should support students with the actual reading and studying that they need to do in their content course. Logistically, it might be best to connect these courses to large lecture courses such as history, sociology, biology and psychology at first, but as the program becomes established and students, counselors, and teachers become aware of their value, more
courses can be added and filled. Bringing reading instruction into the content courses will give the reading courses more immediate relevance to the students, eliminate the stigma of stand-alone reading courses, and solve the problem of skills transfer—students will learn the best reading strategies and skills for that particular domain, and they will have an opportunity to learn in other domains if they so choose. An added bonus is that these courses will be more cost effective because instead of serving thirty students in one three-unit course, instructors will be able to serve forty-five students with three one-unit courses.

In addition to the above content-specific reading courses, a cross-curricular faculty development program should be created, one that gives ongoing support to any content teacher who would like to learn how to help their struggling readers with the required reading in their courses. All teachers are expert readers in their own domains, and if they are so inclined to learn how, they can become wonderful resources for struggling readers within their classrooms. Of course, all content teachers may not be interested, but many teachers across-the-curriculum in community colleges are participating in similar programs—and the results have been significant (The Center for Student Success 43).

Particularly intriguing, is a program called Reading Apprenticeship which is sponsored by an educational think-tank called West Ed, out of San Francisco. This approach is mentioned in a document called, “Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges.” This document is a product of the “strategic plan”—called the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI)—adopted by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors in 2006 “for the purpose of improving student access and
success” (The Center for Student Success 3). The document includes a review of “over 250 references, spanning more than 30 years” in an effort to pinpoint empirically proven “effective practices” in “basic skills” education (The Center for Student Success 4). West Ed has a program for teaching teachers about the Reading Apprenticeship program, showing them how to help their students with reading by integrating reading instruction into their existing curriculum. This organization also offers a Leadership Institute program that will train faculty who will in turn bring the knowledge back to their colleagues. The idea is that a core group of faculty attends the eight-day training, and then holds ongoing faculty development workshops at their respective colleges. In this way, teachers who would like to help their students with reading will have an ongoing support system to help them do so. Implementing this program at Willowbrook would add even more recursive, content specific reading support for struggling readers, and Willowbrook’s BSI committee (who manages state funding from the BSI program mentioned above) might consider funding a Reading Apprenticeship faculty development project.

In addition to infusing reading instruction into content courses across-the-curriculum, explicit reading instruction should be integrated into all developmental writing classes. Reading and writing are “parallel” and “complementary” processes (Kucer 190), and if teachers encourage metacognitive conversations about the relationships and similarities between reading and writing, learning can be enhanced and accelerated (The Center for Student Success 43). Both reading and writing are “context dependent,” both involve “revision of meaning,” both necessitate the use of “background knowledge,” both are “goal and purpose oriented,” both involve “meaning searching,
meaning generating, [and] meaning integrating,” and both require an “active use of linguistic and cognitive resources” (Kucer 192). In addition, if reading instruction is integrated into the developmental English classes, then all students who test into reading will have the benefit of reading instruction because the developmental English classes are mandatory, while reading is not. In this way, instead of only serving 16% of the students who need reading instruction, Willowbrook will come closer to serving 100%.

What might these integrated reading and writing classes look like? Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz describe an empirically proven model for teaching academic literacy in their book, *Reading for Understanding*. This book is published in partnership with WestEd, the educational think tank mentioned above. In fact, WestEd uses their book as a basis for the Reading Apprenticeship seminars. Although *Reading for Understanding* is aimed at middle and high school teachers and its focus in mainly reading, not writing, it nevertheless presents a framework that could be adapted to the adult literacy classroom. Willowbrook’s reading and writing teachers should consider using the pedagogy in this framework to help shape the integrated reading and writing classes.

The authors of *Reading for Understanding* point out that over two decades of research has shown that reading is a complex cognitive and social practice,” (a conclusion thoroughly explained in Stephen Kucer’s book, *Dimensions of Literacy*) and there is no “quick fix” for those who have reading “difficulties.” (Schoenbach et al. 7)

Likewise, Kucer would contend that there is no quick fix for students who have difficulty with academic writing. Schoenbach and her colleagues go on to argue that “there is no skills-only approach that can substitute for extensive reading” and they further contend
that “repeated studies have demonstrated that instruction in isolated grammar, decoding, or comprehension skills may have little or no impact on students’ activity while actually reading” (Schoenbach et al. 7).

Schoenbach and her colleagues have developed an elaborate framework describing the “dimensions of classroom life” that support “reading apprenticeships”: the social dimension, the personal dimension, the cognitive dimension, and the knowledge building dimension. The “social dimension” emphasizes that each person brings “resources” to the community, and that it is important to create a “safe environment” so that students feel comfortable about sharing their “reading difficulties” with the class (22). The “personal dimension” has to do with each student’s identity as a reader, and emphasizes helping them to become “self-aware” of who they are as a reader, why they read, and goals for reading improvement (22). The “cognitive dimension” helps readers to become aware of and develop “problem solving strategies” and “mental processes” which will help them obtain their goals for reading improvement (22). The “Knowledge-building dimension” acknowledges the importance of background knowledge and helps the students to identify and expand the knowledge that they bring to a text (22). In addition to these four dimensions, there is an overlapping “metacognitive conversation” in the classroom (22). The metacognitive overlap is an “ongoing conversation in which the teacher and students think about and discuss their personal relationships to reading, the social environment and resources of the classroom, their cognitive activity, and the kinds of knowledge required to make sense of text” (Schoenbach et al. 22). The idea is for classroom community members (both teachers and students) to become consciously aware of what they think and do as they interact with texts and make what they think and
do “external” through classroom conversations. In this way, both teachers and students explore, explain, and model the necessary habits of mind and cognitive strategies for successful meaning making with academic texts. Twenty years of extensive research reveals that the development of metacognitive abilities facilitates “deep learning and flexible use of knowledge and skills” (Schoenbach 23), and the The Center for Student Success (CSS) asserts that “adults who are poor readers and writers reveal a lack of metacognitive ability about their own skills” (41). Schoenbach and her colleagues have created a promising, flexible framework for helping adult students develop their reading and writing abilities, and their approach not only takes into account the linguistic and cognitive aspects of literacy development, but it also addresses the sociocultural and developmental dimensions of literacy described by Kucer. The following description under the heading “Mining Students’ and Teachers Resources” articulates their conviction that learning is a “social-cognitive interactive process” (20).

In a reading apprenticeship, teachers invite students to become partners in a collaborative inquiry into their reading processes. The aim is to help students become better readers by making the teacher’s reading processes visible to them, by helping them gain insight into their own reading processes, and by having them learn a repertoire of cognitive problem-solving strategies. As the students gain practice in becoming aware of and controlling their own reading processes, they yield additional information for their teacher about the social contexts, strategies, knowledge bases, and understanding they bring to the task of making sense of texts. A reading apprenticeship is at heart a partnership of expertise, drawing both on what subject area teachers know and do as disciplinary readers and on [the student’s] . . . unique and often underestimated strengths as learners. (Schoenbach et al. 14)

The Reading Apprenticeship framework developed by Schoenbach and her colleagues can help Willowbrook’s teachers learn how to demystify the reading and writing processes in a supportive classroom environment using a pedagogy that supports the
development of academic literacy in a holistic manner. Instead of viewing literacy
development as isolated cognitive and linguistic skill building, teachers can support
students as they develop the ability to simultaneously wield all of the literacy
dimensions—linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and developmental.

There has been concern at the RPRC meetings about who will teach these
integrated courses. Can writing teachers teach reading, and can reading teachers teach
writing? What about ESL? Will the needs of the ESL students in these courses be met?
One workable solution to this dilemma is to build in an effective faculty development
system in which faculty from all three disciplines collaborate on a common curriculum,
teach each other about their respective disciplines, share ideas, and offer support to
newcomers. In this way, these integrated courses can be cross-listed and taught by any
faculty from ESL, reading, or English. There is already an experimental course on the
books that has never actually been tried, but it was the result of careful collaboration
between faculty members in all three disciplines, and it is cross-listed so anyone in ESL,
reading, or English can teach it.

What will this faculty development system look like? It would be a good idea
to start with sending a core group of faculty members to WestEd’s Leadership Institute
training, as mentioned above. In addition to obtaining a basic understanding of the
Reading Apprenticeship framework, this core group should collaborate to develop a
common curriculum for the integrated reading and writing classes. As indicated earlier,
this core group should include reading, ESL, and English faculty members so that those
with expertise in each discipline can help to shape the curriculum as well as teach each
other about their respective disciplines.
After the initial shaping of the curriculum framework, experimental “pilot” classes should be run, and the teachers should keep careful reflective notes about the effectiveness of the curriculum. After the pilot classes are complete, faculty should come together and discuss what worked and what did not work—continuing to change and develop the curriculum based on their reflections and observations. This reflective pattern should continue indefinitely so that the teachers and the curriculum can remain responsive to changing student needs. In addition to frequently revisiting the curriculum development, ongoing (at least monthly) faculty meetings should be held, so that teachers can network, troubleshoot, support, and advise each other in their endeavors. New faculty members should participate in a two-day training conducted by experienced faculty; in addition, they should participate in a mentorship program designed to give them ongoing professional support during their first semester of teaching.

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, a significant number of Willowbrook College students would benefit from extra support in academic reading. Not only do more than 60 percent of them test into reading classes, but it is evident to those who work at Willowbrook that the majority of students struggle in their studies because of reading difficulties. Several possible solutions could be implemented to make reading support readily available to all students on a recurring basis—by permeating the college with viable, relevant means of reading support. The reading difficulties of Willowbrook’s students should be addressed from multiple directions in multiple ways, and although the Reading Program should head up the campaign to help students with reading, every teacher on campus can play a significant part in solving the problem. If this problem can be solved, then the entire college will benefit. Student success rates will improve, and
more students will achieve their academic goals. If more students can achieve their academic goals, then the entire surrounding community will reap the rewards. With college success comes confidence, enriched spirits, and empowered minds. Such confident, enriched, and empowered minds create powerful, positive changes in their communities.
WORKS CITED


Counselor. Personal interview. 28 Sept. 2010.


Institutional Researcher. Personal interview. 3 Sept. 2010.


Teacher 1. Personal interview. 10 Aug. 2010.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR

TEACHER 1

1. What do you think about the placement test—ACCUPLACER TM? Are you happy with it?

2. What was the reasoning behind adopting the test? (do you know?)

3. How long has the college been using this test?

4. How is reading defined? (for the purposes of the test?) For example:
   - “A student can read at college level if... (what tasks do they demonstrate on the test to prove this)”
   - “A student cannot read at college level if... (what tasks do they fail to demonstrate on the test?)”

5. Do you feel that this definition is reasonable?

6. What aspects of reading does the test measure?
   - Vocabulary?
   - Background knowledge?
   - Grade level? If so, how is grade level defined and assessed?
   - Ability to infer?
   - Use of context clues?
   - Ability to think critically about the readings?
   - Ability to find main idea?
   - Other?

7. What are your impressions of the test’s validity?

8. In your experience, are most students placed accurately?

9. How does the scoring of the test work? What are the number cut-offs?

10. How are the reading course levels defined, and how are the test results calibrated with the curriculum?

11. If it were in your power to decide, would you choose this method to place students?
12. If not, what placement methods might you advocate and why?

13. Do you feel that the reading program is effective for the most part?

14. What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the reading program?

15. I understand that the reading courses used to have a lab component; was the lab offered at all four levels?

16. Why were the “lab” components dropped?

17. What was the impact of cutting the “lab” portion of the reading program?

18. Are there standard textbooks for each class level? If so, what criteria were used to choose the texts?

19. What are your thoughts on integrated reading and writing programs? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of an integrated approach?

20. Money and politics aside, how would you describe the optimal community college reading program?

21. It is my understanding that students who test into developmental reading levels are not required to take reading. Would you advocate changing this policy?

22. Tell me about the reading for Biology course. How was it set up? How many units? Were you happy with the outcome? If you were to do it again would you make changes? If so, what would you change (money and politics aside)? Would you recommend pursuing similar paring with content courses in the future?

23. It has been proposed that we attach one unit reading courses to required content courses such as history, psychology, sociology, English, and so forth; the reading teacher would have small, mixed level classes (of about 12), and the reading course material would follow the syllabus of the required content course. What do you think? Would something like this work? Or do you think it a better idea to keep the separate reading courses?

24. Do you have any additional advice for me regarding my research?

25. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the reading program?
QUESTIONS FOR THE COUNSELOR

1. As you probably know, only about 16% of students who test into reading courses actually take a reading course in their first semester, and although we haven’t tracked whether they ever take a reading course, the low numbers tell us that most never take a reading course. Why do you think this is the case?

2. Are you happy with the way the reading program is set up? Do you feel that four levels of reading classes are necessary?

3. Some have suggested combining Reading 1 and Reading 2, but others feel it would not be possible to adequately cover all the 1 & 2 material in a single class. What do you think about this idea from a counselor’s perspective?

4. Some have suggested two (Reading 1 and Reading 2) 5 unit, integrated reading and writing classes which would fulfill both reading and English 2 requirements. Does this seem like a good idea from your point of view?

5. It has also been suggested that we might be able to combine all four classes—Reading 1 & 2 and English 1 and 2 into one, 5 unit class. The course outline is already on the books, cross listed for ESL English, and Reading. The course was the product of collaboration between ESL, English, and reading faculty but the pilot didn’t make (perhaps it was the 5 units?). A student who passes this class would be able to take English and/or Reading 3.

6. What is your perspective on this idea?

7. We have also discussed phasing out Reading 3 and Reading 4 and replacing them with general, discipline specific (Reading-4-like) courses such as: Reading for Life Sciences, Reading for Social Sciences, Reading for Humanities, and Reading for Health Sciences.

Or

We have discussed creating various reading classes similar to the biology reading course. These courses would be one or two unit reading courses offered as optional, complementary courses that would help students with the reading that they need to do for large lecture classes. For example, one teacher has 100-150 students in History A&B courses and has expressed interest in this idea.

What is your take on these two ideas? Does one seem better than the other?

8. Do you have any other suggestions about program design?

9. If you were in charge, how might you design the program?
Placement test:

10. Do you feel that the placement test accurately assess the student reading ability?

11. What kind of testing results do you receive as a counselor? Can you discern a student’s strengths and weaknesses?

12. If you can discern a student’s strengths and weaknesses do you try to match them to a particular level based on that in combination with the cut-off scores?

13. How closely do you adhere to the reading test “cut-off” scores when recommending reading classes?

Efficacy:

14. Do you think that the reading courses at Willowbrook are beneficial to students?

15. What is your impression of the effectiveness of the Reading Program over the years? Has the degree of effectiveness changed? If so, what do you attribute the changes to?

16. Do you feel that our current reading program is sufficient for the needs of most reading students? Why or why not?

17. If a student struggles in their content classes, do you recommend a reading class to them? Why or why not?

18. How can we make the reading program more effective?

Student Population:

19. Can you give me a rough description of the students who test into our reading classes?
   - How old are most of them?
   - What is their educational background?
   - Are there many “generation 1.5” students?
   - Have most of them grown up and attended grammar school locally?
   - Are there a lot of immigrants in this group of students? What about ESL students?
   - Do their demographics seem to change from level to level?

Student Satisfaction:

20. Do you ever get feedback about the reading program from your students?

21. If so, what have you heard?

22. Do you agree with what you have heard from the students?

23. Do you think this represents what most students think?
APPENDIX C
QUESTIONS FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCHER

Placement test:
1. How many of our students tested below college level in reading this fall?
2. How does the scoring work on the placement test? (i.e., what do the numbers look like, and what scores determine which levels?)
3. How are the scores calibrated into class levels?
4. What exactly does the placement test screen for? (i.e., which reading skills?)
5. Do some skills count for more points than others? (For example, does an ability to infer count more than finding the main idea or vocabulary knowledge?)
6. Does the test determine a reading grade level? If so, which standards are used to determine grade level?
7. What are your impressions of the test’s validity?

Reading Program:
8. What percentage of the students who tested below college level in reading are taking reading courses?
9. Do you have any current data on the success rates of students (those who test below college level) who take reading courses vs. those who do not?
10. How do success rates of students who take reading vs. students who do not opt to take reading (but test below college level) compare when taking GE content courses? (English, psychology, history, etc.).
11. What about the experimental biology reading course? Does your research indicate that this course was effective? If so, would you say that the results were significant? Would you recommend we design similar courses based on the data?
12. How does the reading for biology course compare to the more general reading 4 course, as far as effectiveness? (Of course, that may depend on how we define “effective”—how would you define “effective”?).
13. Was the auto reading program similar to the biology reading course in results? If not, how was it different? If it was different, do you have an impression as to why?
14. What are the retention rates in the various reading classes?

Pertaining to the 2010 “Success, Retention and Efficiency” reports:
15. What does “WSCH” mean? How is it derived?
16. What does the WSCH/FTEF comparison mean?
17. Does the “success” category include drops and withdrawals?