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Community College Developmental Writing Programs Most Promising Practices: What the Research Tells Educators

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ABSTRACT

Students at community colleges are being placed into developmental writing classes at significantly high rates, as high as 80% at some colleges. Many of these students are students of color, and the need to help them persist and succeed is of increasing importance. The purpose of this study was to investigate the most promising practices by community college developmental writing programs. This article presents a review of more than 245 publications from over 450 authors, synthesized down to 36 validated studies with the goal of informing scholars and practitioners of the current state of the field. Themes emerging from these studies and a conceptual model through which findings can be viewed are presented. The analysis, with a focus on the structural, curricular, andragogical, and relational domains, documents only validated studies about the most promising practices. This article supports, challenges, and recommends how to better serve students in the developmental writing context. This author hopes to change how colleges implement developmental writing practices so that practitioners will be given the best tools to help all students succeed.

When students register at community colleges, they are typically instructed to take assessment tests, specifically in math, reading, and writing. These assessments classify students as either college ready or developmental (developmental, remedial, and basic skills are used interchangeably in this article). The college-ready students are able to enroll in college-level courses that count for community college certifications and degrees or for transfer credit to 4-year universities. Developmental or remedial students are assigned to basic-skills courses intended to raise their proficiencies to college-ready standards (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). These basic skills classes are, in most cases, noncredit and do not transfer to 4-year colleges (Adams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009). Additionally, these courses do not calculate in the unit total for certifications or degrees (Adams et al., 2009).

The study of traditional developmental pathways becomes even more meaningful when we understand how many students and what kinds of students are affected by being placed into developmental education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 12.4 million students enroll in the 1,123 community colleges nationwide (AACC, 2015). Of these 12.4 million students, 7.4 million are credit seeking, with 4.5 million (61%) part-time and 2.9 million (49%) full-time (AACC, 2015). With this many students seeking educational opportunities, between 50 and 80% of students across the nation are placed into developmental pathways (Bailey et al., 2010; Complete College America, 2012; Hodara, 2015; Illowsky, Malloy, & Deegen, 2013; California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2015), with many of these learners put into English remediation sequences (Henson & Hern, 2014).

Community colleges serve students with diverse needs including 36% that are first generation college students, 17% that are single parents, 12% that are learners with disabilities, 7% that are noncitizens, and 4% that are veterans (AACC, 2015). Boylan, Bonham, Claxton, and Bliss (1992)

found that 77% of all developmental education students at community colleges started with the intention of earning a college degree. In a survey of 87,000 students, Bryant (2001) noted that 66% of developmental students intended to transfer or attain a certificate/degree. Unfortunately, most don't achieve these intended goals (Bailey et al., 2010; Henson & Hern, 2014). For example, Complete College America (2012) reported that 21.6% of developmental community college students transfer or earn a degree within 3 years. In addition, researchers in an Education Longitudinal Study found that only 28% of students who started out as developmental completed a degree in 8.5 years (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). Despite the fact that (to date) substantial efforts and investment in education reforms have not dramatically increased student outcomes, policymakers and practitioners in higher education continue to seek ways to address systemic educational underachievement—particularly in the area of developmental education.

Because of this lack of student success in the developmental pipeline, and with most of the students in the pipeline being racially, culturally, and economically diverse, recent and intense research has begun to take hold nationwide that has focused on these groups. Most of this research is examining developmental education programs (Bailey & Cho, 2010; Higbee, Lundell, & Duranczyk, 2002; Illowsky et al., 2013), and many colleges are now investigating and trying different strategies, including acceleration (i.e., reducing and redesigning developmental sequences), supplemental instruction (peer-tutoring), and others (Bailey, 2009a; Edgecombe, Jaggars, Xu, & Barragan, 2014). Also, Complete College America, Community College Research Center, Lumina Foundation, Achieving the Dream and other organizations are trying to help.

These developments contribute to the shaping, or reshaping, of American postsecondary education, especially at the community college level. The new shift brings an intensified mindfulness of the importance of taking care of student populations that are experiencing the lowest rates of success. To better prepare students for an increasingly diverse and changing society, campuses across the country are engaged in efforts to investigate why the outcomes of developmental programs, including writing programs, have limited success. Considerable energy and money, about \$3 billion annually (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011), have been placed into reforms, and these changes have not increased student outcomes. The inadequacies of these interventions are felt in all developmental areas, but particularly in writing. As a result, developmental writing practitioners are looking for new techniques to adopt (Bailey, 2009b; Edgecombe et al., 2014).

Understanding, analyzing, and compiling all the research of a given topic is significant for synthesizing and bringing clarity to a community. This is especially important when adding new knowledge by integrating data and informing practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers (Bland, Meurer, & Maldonado, 1995). The primary purpose of this research was to identify, then synthesize, and finally to inform about the most promising practices for writing remediation in American community colleges. Thousands of articles, books, and dissertations have been written about developmental education—thus requiring a need to synthesize what has been learned about the most promising practices. When refining and limiting the search to developmental writing at community colleges using specific key terms in the title, the results showed more than 400 scholars published over 200 studies. Some of these publications were doctoral dissertations, which was an indication of how recent the research was. The search was further refined to show the most promising practices within the structural, curricular, andragogical, and relational domains. This article examined and synthesized these studies with the purpose of informing practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers of the current context in the field of developmental writing. Through this analytical and synthesizing process, a framework was created to present recurrent themes across the studies.

The intention of this article is to make the developmental pathway more effective for students. The hope is that this paper's inquiry will emphasize applicable evidence for practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers as educators attempt to further recognize the impacts of structural, curricular, andragogical, and relational components of developmental writing programs. I want to see what institutional and classroom practices work for developmental writing students, to see what needs to change, and ultimately, to help be a participant in the transformation nationwide.

Methodology

In 2013, I started reading and collecting texts related to the most effective and innovative developmental education programs nationwide. This began with a broad search that included all disciplines (math, writing, etc.). There were a plethora of methods being used to help students reach transfer classes. The analysis then focused on developmental writing. This modification limited the scope of the publications being examined, but three problems surfaced. The first was that most of the research was focused on 4-year universities. The second was that much of the research was discussionary and did not provide documented evidence to validate outcomes. The third was that the outcomes did not address why a program, course, or teacher was effective. As such, there was a lack of specifics with how practitioners go about using the best, validated techniques with developmental writing students. These problems altered the study to include only validated practices at the community college level.

The investigation was conducted using Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) as the main academic research tool. Google Scholar was used to search for articles and then access them through portable document format, electronic format, or print copy. Google Scholar (2016) “helps you find relevant work across the world of scholarly research” that come “from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites” (para. 1). Google Scholar offers an easy way to explore all disciplines of scholarly literature in a wide variety of sources including articles, dissertations, books, abstracts, and reports. Additional article and report searches were conducted through Academic Search Premier, ERIC—EBSCO, ERIC—ProQuest, Journal Storage (JSTOR), and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. Supplementary resources were obtained through both San Diego State University and San Diego Mesa College Campus Library Catalogs.

The search keywords encompassed the following terms: *writing, composition, English, developmental, remedial, remediation, basic skills, community college, two year college, junior college, and technical college*. Because groupings of these terms were used within each search, there were a total of 48 possible search combinations. When Google Scholar and other catalogs were searched with the option of showing results from anywhere in the article, each search combination listed thousands of articles; therefore, the search was limited to include only the terms within the title of the academic resources.

Once the literature was gathered, noted, and categorized, the references section provided more to the research and added value to the cataloging. This was necessary because of the limited amount of research on the most promising practices within developmental English that were validated with qualitative or quantitative data. An exhaustive analysis process was used that looked at all the sources for the research purpose, research question(s), methodological approach, conceptual framework, results, discussion, implications, and conclusions. The process undertaken was an extensive literature synthesis procedure. Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously by way of constant comparative methods, similar to a zigzag process. According to Glaser (1965), constant comparative methods include delimitation of boundaries and saturation of data.

Following the analytic procedure outline by Glaser (1965), I analyzed the data using open, axial, and selective coding to identify causal conditions, intervening conditions, and outcomes. Shared properties and dimensions were noted, which helped identify emerging themes. The themes were distilled and then arranged visually with mind-mapping software (SimpleMind), and then they were redrafted with Apple’s Keynote for this article to emphasize visual appeal and simplicity. This process included an identification of emerging themes from the literature. The themes produced four domains, 28 buckets representing different techniques, and five subbuckets indicating variants of techniques that were deemed effective according to researchers (Figure 1). The comprehensive data was too extensive to be reported in this article; therefore, visuals and figures are shown throughout with buckets indicating the authors of the research within each respective subcategory.

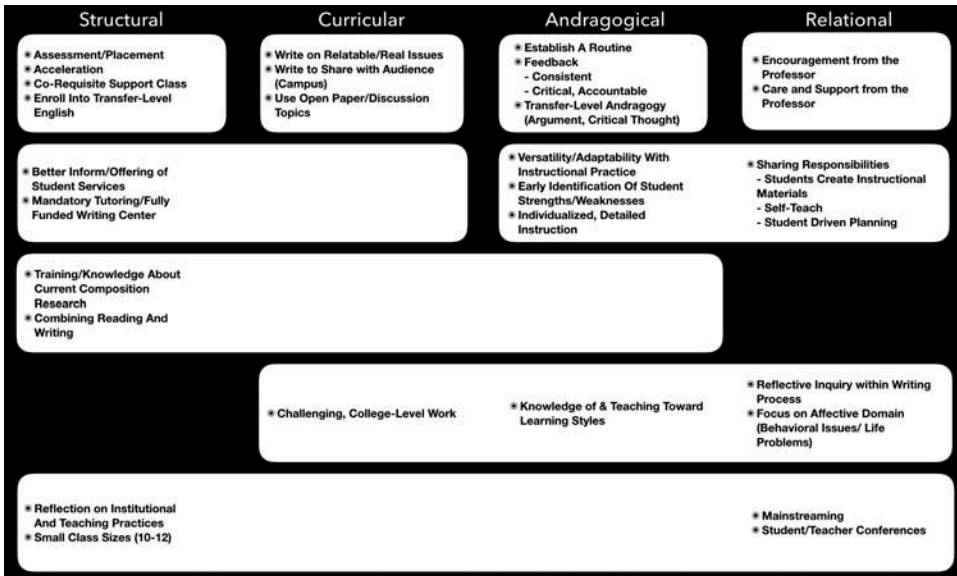


Figure 1. Most promising practice techniques within developmental writing domains (Structural, Curricular, Andragogical, and Relational). The first row includes the most promising practice techniques that are only applicable to one domain. Each row after that contains techniques that are predominant in one domain, yet applicable in other domains as well.

Towards a conceptual model of developmental writing success

For this article, I analyzed and synthesized over 245 articles, dissertations, books, abstracts, working papers, and reports by over 450 authors. [Figure 1](#) reveals the themes that emerged from this existing literature. To enhance the likelihood of identifying pertinent information, I only included and mapped the recurrent practices that occurred in two or more independent references. Of the 245 studies and reports researched, and based upon the criteria that there had to be some evidence of success to support the author's claims, only 36 studies met the threshold. Evidence of success was defined by techniques, methods, and practices that showed an increase in effectiveness as described by researchers within the parameters of their qualitative or quantitative studies. This analysis identified four distinctive domains to be considered: structural, curricular, andragogical, and relational.

Three of these domains (structural, curricular, and pedagogical) are created and referenced in *Accelerating the integrated instruction of developmental reading and writing at Chabot College*. In this book, the researchers suggest these types of developmental education reforms are not mutually exclusive (Edgecombe et al., 2014). The visual for their frame ([Figure 2](#)) is an inverted triangle due to the types of reform (top to bottom) that colleges are able to institutionalize. Structural reform tends to be easier to implement because it does not require significant transformation to teacher pedagogy (Edgecombe et al., 2014). This is problematic from an equity perspective because this is one of the sole institutional mandates.

According to the literature, classroom and institutional practices orbit within relationships; therefore, that theme is added as a fourth domain. The conceptual model for my research is a triangle shape with relational as the base ([Figure 3](#)).

The reason why the visual is triangular with a specific order of the domains is elaborated on in the implications and conclusions section of this article.

In the following four sections, the definition of each domain is discussed in the corresponding section, along with a brief overview describing the various themes. Additionally, themes acknowledged from the research are contextualized. Each theme is a most promising practice that has been validated by at least two independent studies. Words italicized within the text signify themes that can

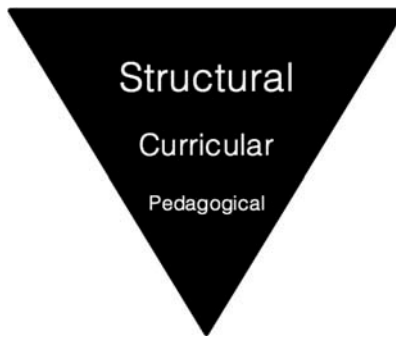


Figure 2. Types of developmental education reforms (Edgecombe et al., 2014).

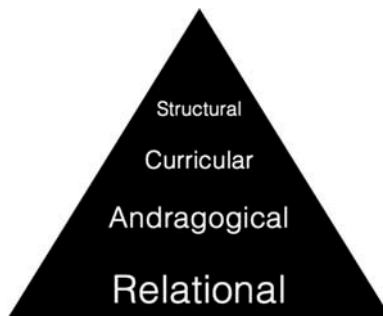


Figure 3. Domains of developmental writing practices.

be seen in the visuals. Charts are also included for each theme to elaborate, clarify, and list the authors (alphabetically) of the research. This is provided to offer ease for the audience to access the research.

Results

Structural

The structural domain refers to the delivery of the courses: how many units the courses are, how many hours they meet per day/week, how long the semester is, how one English class bridges to another as a prerequisite or a corequisite, and how developmental writing classes look organizationally. Most current developmental English programs include a combination of two-to-five pretransfer, noncredit courses with two transfer-level, credit-earning courses (Bailey & Cho, 2010). The most common reforms taken by colleges in the past decade include structural changes. Edgecombe, Cormier, Bickerstaff, and Barragan (2013) contended that the very nature of these structural changes occurs because it is the path with the least political impediments. Community colleges and English departments are able to accumulate support to make structural reforms, which most likely accounts for their prevalence (Edgecombe et al., 2013). The research collected for this article supports this notion, simply because this is where the most volume of validated studies come from (Figure 4).

The two most researched and validated techniques are in the structural context: assessment/placement and acceleration. Assessment/placement practices include accurate placement reform, self-placement, high school grade point average (GPA) placement, and multiple measures initiatives. Many of these studies are less specific to developmental writing and more inclusive of all

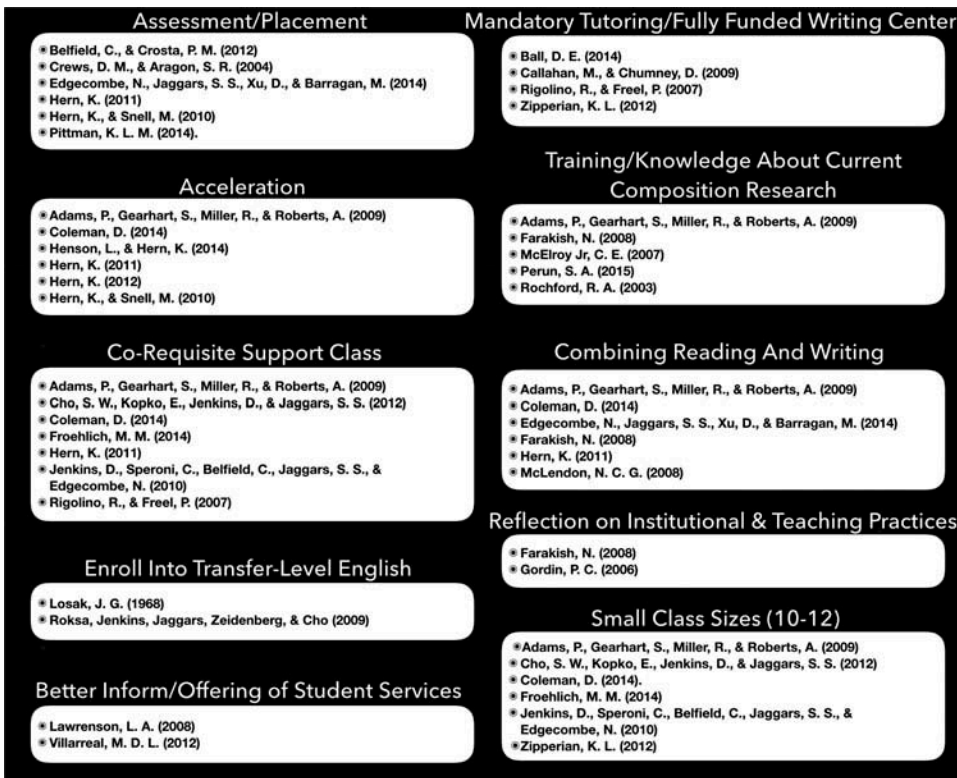


Figure 4. Most promising practice techniques and author research that is primarily within the structural developmental writing domain.

developmental education pathways; therefore, they are not included in this article (e.g., Bailey, 2009a; Hern, 2012; Schwartz & Jenkins, 2007). However, the consistent notion throughout the research about developmental writing is that placement tests are ineffective predictors of college success and should be abandoned; or at the very least, the importance of these tests should be minimized. In the most traditional of these views (even if placed into developmental courses), Crews and Aragon (2004) stated, “students needing developmental work need to complete developmental courses before being allowed to enroll in college-level courses” (p. 9). New self-placement approaches look at how students understand more about their own capabilities than an assessment test does and have improved the accuracy of appropriate class-level placement (Edgecombe et al., 2014). In a study of a large suburban college in California, Hern (2011) noted that the college’s accelerated developmental course had no minimum placement level, therefore students of any placement score can enroll. Her study demonstrated that students who would normally score many levels below have been more successful self-placing (Hern, 2011).

Researchers contended that many people misunderstand what acceleration means (Rogers & Kimpston, 1992; Scott & Conrad, 1992). Accelerated structures are referred to by many names: compressed, condensed, intensive, time-shortened, and other terminologies (Scott & Conrad, 1992). Simply put, accelerated courses are fairly routine because they are intended to meet students’ demands for flexible course scheduling (Scott & Conrad, 1992) such as summer classes, winter session, and shortened semesters, among others. Acceleration is described “as the reorganization of instruction and curricula in ways that facilitate the completion of educational requirements in an expedited manner” (Edgecombe, 2011, p. 4). The important part of acceleration that applies to developmental writing students is the shortened timeframe (Adams et al., 2009; Coleman, 2014; Edgecombe, 2011). Students

do not have to spend a year or two taking noncredit courses; they take a path that streamlines to the transfer course in a shorter amount of time. Similarly, acceleration does not mean students do less work. In many cases, students are required to complete tougher, more challenging assignments. What is argued by many acceleration proponents is that exit point attrition rates are significantly diminished (Adams et al., 2009; Coleman, 2014; Edgcombe, 2011; Henson & Hern, 2014). Exit point attrition rates are places where students pass a course, yet they do not enroll in the next course. Adams et al. (2009) conducted a longitudinal study and found that students drop out at higher rates as sequences get longer. For example, they found that 20% of students who passed the highest-level developmental course never attempted the next course in the sequence: the first transfer-level class. They remove this 20% attrition rate simply by eliminating one of the classes in the sequence (Adams et al., 2009).

The corequisite support class is a form of acceleration, but it is very specific and has slightly different qualities; therefore, it has its own theme in this article. The co-requisite support class is a noncredit course that is taken at the same time as the transfer-level course instead of being a prerequisite. This approach features classes being taught in a manner that supports material in the transfer-level course (Adams et al., 2009). This analysis revealed the most-researched corequisite program in the country is the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County (e.g., Adams et al., 2009; Bailey, 2009b; Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012; Coleman, 2014; Froehlich, 2014). Twice as many students pass the college-level course when matched with students from the conventional developmental series (Coleman, 2014; Froehlich, 2014). Using a quantitative analysis, Cho et al. (2012) found that ALP students were more successful than traditional students and had higher statistically significant rates of persistence. Other research supports these findings. Coleman (2014) reported “ALP students have higher success rates in both the first and second college-level writing course, earn more credits, and are retained at higher rates” (p. 2).

One of the earliest validated studies argued that colleges should allow remedial students to enroll directly into transfer-level English. As part of an experiment at Miami-Dade College, Losak (1968) found that 70% of developmental students passed transfer English when enrolled directly into it. Losak (1968) concluded “present attempts at academic remediation need considerable revision” (p. 18), and “it is generally just as effective for low-scoring students to go directly into the regular freshman English sequence” (p. 1). Current research has also indicated that students who disregard their suggested placement into developmental English and enroll directly into transfer-level English courses are succeeding at the same rates as all students (Roksa, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, & Cho; 2009).

Better inform/offering of students services was discussed with qualitative feedback in a research by Lawrenson (2008). The research stated that developmental English professors and programs can support students by “creating a handout, putting phone numbers for services on syllabi, inviting student services representatives to their classes, taking students on student services tours, or creating liaisons between student services” (p. 237). The research also suggested that students are uninformed about the services available to them. For example, first generation students do not know what a writing center does or why they need to see an advisor. Some colleges even have child-care available, and developmental English professors need to consistently talk about these services, especially with culturally diverse students (Lawrenson, 2008).

Another structural most promising practice is to have mandatory tutoring and a fully funded writing center. The Supplemental Writing Workshop (SWW) Program is a fully functioning center that merges instruction, workshop, tutoring, and course hours all into one program (Rigolino & Freel, 2007). The SWW has tutor and professor job functions intertwine and overlap (Rigolino & Freel, 2007). In a less integrated approach, other research states that mandatory hour-long tutoring sessions be required every week for developmental writers. Also, Zipperian (2012) recommended that “colleges need to fund a campus writing center” (p. 156).

Significant training/knowledge about current composition research is a theme that emerged from the research at a few different levels. One study discussed how some teachers had a superior working knowledge of student learning styles (Rochford, 2003). For example, Rochford (2003) stated professors trained in 21 elements within a learning styles paradigm focusing on environmental,

emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological stimuli have a significant advantage in reaching and teaching basic skills writers (Rochford, 2003). Rochford contends that students need to be taught and guided through what their own learning paradigms are.

Some colleges have separate reading and writing programs. The current, validated research says that combining reading and writing instruction is a promising practice to help developmental writing students, and successful developmental programs include reading comprehension, analysis, and guidance as part of their core philosophies. Hern (2011) stated that reading and writing are integral, and benefit, when combined in college courses. Coleman (2014) noted that engaged and active reading are a significant part of instructor's teachings at Jackson College and Lansing Community College as part of their ALP models. Edgecombe et al. (2014) research found that Chabot College's faculty leaders saw a need for reform, which led to an integration of reading and writing instruction across their college.

Reflection on institutional and teaching practices is a strategy for colleges and instructors to identify what works. When reading and writing instructors reflect back on their practices, they facilitate marked improvement in what they are doing (Farakish, 2008). Farakish's findings included instructors who "collectively reflected on their teaching practices and instructional challenges, shared their insights regarding best practices, and worked collaboratively to find solutions to some of the common problems of practice" (p. 125). This allowed "them opportunities to learn from each other's experiences" (p. 126). Better outcomes were also indicated when colleges and instructors were able to reflect to celebrate successes and failures (Gordin, 2006).

The last theme seen in the research within the structural domain is small class sizes (10–12). There are a myriad of reasons this is cited as a big part of a necessary structural change for developmental writers: less fear, individualized instruction, cohort learning, flexibility, camaraderie (Adams et al., 2009; Cho et al., 2012; Coleman, 2014; Froehlich, 2014; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jaggars, & Edgecombe, 2010; Zipperian, 2012). Moreover, Adams et al. (2009) "have concluded that many of the benefits of ALP derive from this small class size. Students are less prone to behavior problems when they are in a small group. The bonding mentioned earlier is more likely to occur. And the conversation can be focused on each individual's questions much more easily" (p. 61).

Curricular

Structural reorganization may be the most common; however, in the quest to help developmental students succeed, the nationwide network of community colleges need across-the-board curricular improvements. The curricular domain refers to what is taught in the classroom. This domain looks less at style (e.g., acceleration, corequisite) and more at substance and requirements from the college and faculty (Figure 5).

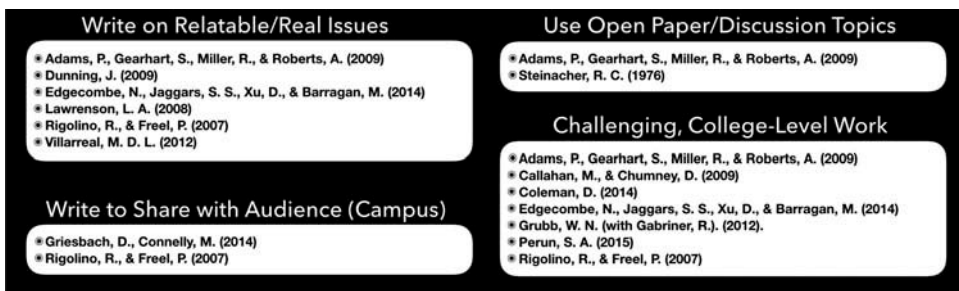


Figure 5. Most promising practice techniques and author research that is primarily within the curricular developmental writing domain.

One curricular method shown to be successful in the classroom is to write about relatable/real issues. Fun and creative is the language students sometimes use to describe relatable assignments (Villarreal, 2012). This point is emphasized by a student in Dunning's (2009) research: "It would have been better if they gave us a list that we could choose from. Let us pick the one that we feel comfortable writing about" (p. 61).

Another curricular theme that emerged is assignments that are written to be shared with an audience. A report by Griesbach and Connelly (2014) noted that a successful professor assigned projects that focused on campus initiatives. For example, students wrote about urban chicken farming, which led to a continued collaboration with a student group of sustainability. The main idea is that "the campus became the source material and the audience for student writing" (Griesbach & Connelly, 2014, p. 6). Using open paper/discussion topics is another theme that emerged. Steinacher's (1976) research found that student-writing growth was supported through the approach of giving students a free choice of paper topics. Besides open paper topics, open discussions work well with students in allowing them to feel partly in control of their education and lives (Adams et al., 2009).

The final category within the curricular domain is the promising practice of students doing challenging, college-level work. This is supported by numerous studies, and research suggests that challenging students might be the most effective reform within the curricular domain. Callahan and Chumney (2009) accounted that "it is critical that students receive training that will enable them to do university-level academic work" (p. 1660). Perun (2015) asserted that "developmental English professors must develop courses that avoid remedial pedagogy and provide opportunities for students to practice college-level literacy—reading and writing" (p. 130). Most of the other research echoes this sentiment that developmental writing students need to be academically treated like transfer-level college students.

Andragogical

While the curricular domain refers to what is taught in the classroom, the andragogical domain refers to how the curriculum is taught in the classroom. For this reason, attention to the andragogical domain is essential. Practitioners looking to disrupt the developmental pipeline have looked at andragogical practices as another potential reform, but have found this approach less frequent at the community college level (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Venezia & Hughes, 2013).

Simply put, andragogy is defined as the art and science of how adults learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014). Knowles et al. (2014) reported on the five principles that differentiate adult learners from younger learners: the adult learner is self-directing; adults are the wealthiest sources of experience in a community of learners; adult learning is conditional on purposefulness and necessity; learning needs to be wrapped around meaningful life experiences; and adult learners are inspired to learn by internal rather than external factors (Knowles et al., 2014).

One andragogical promising practice geared toward basic skills writing students is to establish a routine so students know what to expect (Figure 6). Stallings (2010) reported that a routine include consistently showing up to class 5 minutes early and making sure there are regular and reliable assignment patterns. Also, professors should help students establish and maintain academic routines for homework and assignments (Stallings, 2010). Teachers need to establish the same routines seen in transfer-level classes, and they ought to help students with time-management skills, which include establishing life and academic routines (Coleman, 2014).

It is also reported in the literature that students require consistent/critical feedback on their work. Students in Villarreal's (2012) analysis, reported having productive interactions with professors on academic growth and course projects. The students recommended that professors use e-mails, office hours, in-class attention, and social media. Rigolino and Freel (2007) recounted that students were able to get oral feedback on any assignment they wanted as many times as twice a week during regular workshop sessions. In addition, Perun (2015) noted that "getting clear, consistent, and well

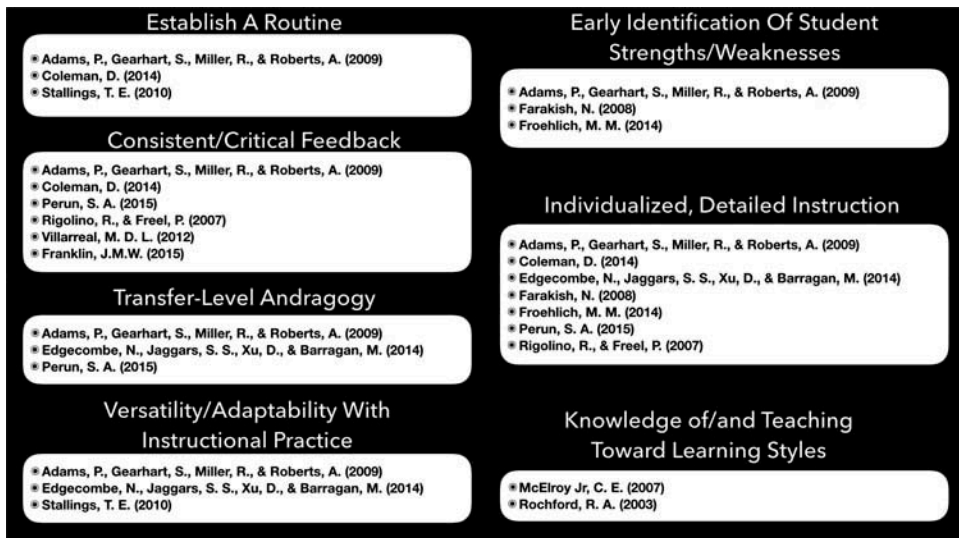


Figure 6. Most promising practice techniques and author research that is primarily within the andragogical developmental writing domain.

communicated expectations ultimately shaped new approaches to coursework that enabled students to practice writing in ways that are central to success in college-level courses—namely developing essays through revising” (p. 127).

Perun (2015) also noticed that professors need to focus on transfer-level andragogy (argument, critical thought):

The students I interviewed only developed the ability to write college-level essays by completing essays using their initial approach, failing, and then having the opportunity to try again using a different approach. Indeed, the opportunity to practice seems to be the recurring theme across the literature (p. 129).

Some of the transfer-level andragogy includes: audience awareness, revision practices, embedding grammar and punctuation in writing and reading assignments (not in stand-alone lessons), and reading complex/primarily nonfiction (Edgecombe et al., 2014; Perun, 2015). The simple and primary thinking behind focusing on transfer-level andragogy for developmental writers is to give students the experience of being a transfer-level writer (Edgecombe et al., 2014).

Another andragogical practice written about in the literature is versatility and adaptability with regard to instructional practices. At Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), the Accelerated Learning Program is flexible in meeting the needs of students by offering enough time and space for the discussions to be student-directed (Adams et al., 2009). Stallings (2010) reported that a successful professor delivered “tentative lesson plans for upcoming classes, those plans most often changed, sometimes during the session itself” and “adapted her teaching of the content to the needs of her students, and in doing so encouraged them to value the work they were doing as viable contributions toward their learning” (p. 53). This versatility was determined to be the core reason her students were able to successfully navigate the course, which was substantiated by student feedback (Stallings, 2010).

Early identification of student strengths and weaknesses is a practice that can build trust from the start of the semester, and Froehlich (2014) found that “getting to know each student’s abilities early through a writing sample” would lead to “early identification of student strengths and weaknesses” and ultimately remove “the fear of reading and writing” (p. 133).

The andragogical practice of early identification of student strengths and weaknesses is closely related to individualized, detailed instruction. More so than just commenting on essays, multiple researchers determined that professors who spent time with each student, through consultations, in-

class meetings, office hours, or other means, directly affected student outcomes in successful ways and helped students persevere in the course (Edgecombe et al., 2014; Froehlich, 2014; Perun, 2015; Rigolino & Freel, 2007). Farakish (2008) concluded that colleges try to make developmental reading and writing instruction systematized by providing set syllabi, course outlines, using standardized tests and prompts, but successful professors customize their teaching strategies to each student by intentionally using formal and informal assessments to pinpoint each student's academic needs.

The technique knowledge of & teaching toward learning styles resides in the andragogical domain, but also touches both the curricular and relational domains. Professional development for professors has been validated across many disciplines and seems to be a universally understood most promising practice. However, more validated research is needed to inform professors about specific institutional trainings on the most promising techniques. McElroy (2007) stated, "It is especially important for faculty teaching developmental courses to vary their teaching methods in order to meet the learning preferences of all students" (p. 74). Professors need to be provided professional development that focuses on the skill of using various teaching practices (McElroy, 2007). Not only should faculty be trained on learning styles, but students "need to be tested for their individual learning styles so that teachers can design lessons to accommodate their learning style preferences" (Rochford, 2003, p. 675). Rochford mentioned that the Dunn and Dunn Learning-style model specifies "21 elements that influence the way in which people learn new and difficult material" (Rochford, 2003, p. 667).

Relational

The relational domain refers to connections. This domain looks at how professors develop relationships with students, how student-to-student relationships are manifested, how students engage with course content, how the college bonds with professors and students, and how energies intertwine in the developmental writing context. In 1981, John Roueche was worried that most teaching development and research studies concentrated on the cognitive domain leading to a neglect of the behaviors within the affective domain. It comes as no surprise that this advice was largely ignored for so many years. Roueche (1981) determined that "teachers are fearful of consciously working toward affective development because those processes are somehow thought of as extraneous to the learning process. In reality, affective development informs cognitive development" (p. 42). Roueche concluded that intellectual growth and learning would be severely hampered unless nurturing, affirmative feelings were a central part of the classroom. Roueche was resolute in his thinking that nontraditional students, much like our current developmental student population, needed to have relational development within the classroom or the improvement of their skill set was essentially unattainable (Roueche, 1981).

In fact, Vincent Tinto contended that a lack of adequate interaction between students and other students, students and faculty, and students and staff repeatedly contribute to the feelings of isolation. Ultimately, this causes the student to emotionally withdraw and leave college (Tinto, 1986). The reason these observations are important to note is because of the success some programs are now having with their rigorous emphasis and integration of relational practices within curriculum (Figure 7). The most statistically successful and widely heralded English developmental program at the community college level is the previously mentioned Accelerated Learning Program started at the Community College of Baltimore County.

In sum, for basic writers, ALP doubles the success rate, halves the attrition rate, does it in half the time (one semester instead of two), and costs slightly less per successful student. When these data are presented to administrators, the case for adopting the ALP model is compelling (Adams et al., 2009, p. 64).

A significant amount of validated research in the relational domain comes from studies involving ALP and comparable programs.

A successful relational practice seen in the research is encouragement from the professor. Lawrenson (2008) pointed out that contrary to perceived notions, Hispanic students reported a

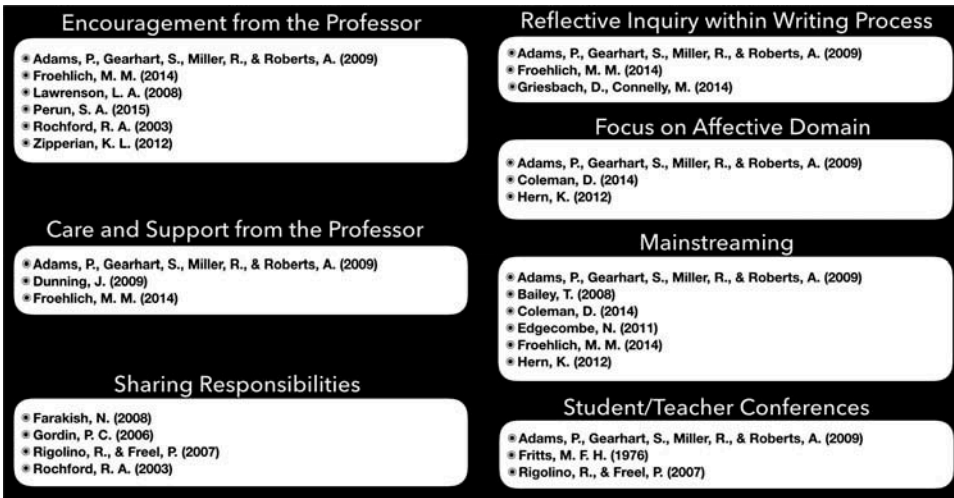


Figure 7. Most promising practice techniques and author research that is primarily within the relational developmental writing domain.

high level of support from their parents for educational and professional goals, even though their parents did not go to college themselves. Therefore, teachers should maintain that type of encouragement in the classroom because according to growing research, it works for most students (Adams et al., 2009; Froehlich, 2014; Perun, 2015; Rochford, 2003). There are different types of encouragement that practitioners should be attentive to: students valuing their own work, coming to class, effort, and perseverance while being challenged, among others. For example, a student in Zipperian's (2012) report included student feedback that commented on how a professor did not talk at the students, he encouraged them. The professor would turn the desks so the students had to look at each other in a u-shape, and they all talked together in a more connected way.

Care and support from the professors can also be seen as successfully navigating the relational domain with students. A student in Froehlich's (2014) study commented that he felt cared for and that the professor wanted him to succeed because of the expanded availability for discussion and answering questions. An African American student in Dunning's (2009) report specified, "And then there are some that really *care*. They sit down with you. They have patience. They talked to you. They spend a lot of time with you" (Dunning, 2009, p. 91). What will the effect be if professors show they care? The student expands on this relational practice: "A student will do better if the professors show them that they care and wants them to succeed. They will do much better. It shows the student that the professor has faith in that student" (Dunning, 2009, p. 91).

Another validated practice effectively teaching to the affective domain is sharing responsibilities with students. Rochford (2003) concluded that teachers should have students generate materials for classroom lessons:

By involving the students in the design of materials, the instructor accomplishes two goals. First, the amount of work required to create the materials is reduced, especially when tactually-oriented students craft artistic materials for classroom use. Second, by designing the materials that will be used for learning, students will be engaging in a form of independent self-teaching, a critical skill needed to survive in college and one that is reinforced by decades of adult learning research (p. 675).

Reinforcing this notion, Farakish (2008) proposes that student-driven planning practices may facilitate the teaching of community college developmental reading/writing.

Reflective inquiry in the writing process helps students become more self-aware while deepening their experiences. Reflective inquiry could be writing reflections on previously crafted essays or

reflecting within an assignment. As a result of reflective inquiry, Froehlich (2014) noted that students have a better attitude and perception of their experiences through writing. Griesbach and Connelly (2014) found that students were able to change thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about themselves and others through reflecting. In a service-learning project where students were paired with culturally diverse students, one student exclaimed they had invaluable experiences. That student said it changed the way they felt about other countries and American's way of life. Using these reflecting practices in the classroom is what made the experiences deeper for that student. The professor contended that "reflections are evidence of a transformation in societal awareness that is directly traceable to connections created among students" (p. 4).

Focusing on the affective domain (behavioral issues/life problems) is a strength of the most innovative developmental programs. Adams et al. (2009) discuss the challenges many developmental writers have that are not academically related: financial issues, relationship problems, demanding home and job responsibilities, among others. "We ask students to create a timeline that accounts for everything they must do in a given week, an exercise that sometimes leads them to make changes in their lives to increase their chances for success" (Adams et al., 2009, p. 62). Humor (or mockery) is another technique that professors use to combat the "high school attitude" (Adams et al., 2009, p. 63) about education where students think getting good grades or being perceived as smart is a negative quality (Adams et al., 2009, p. 63). Trained professors acknowledge this attitude and try to change the mindset within students. Some other behavioral issues to be dealt with in the affective domain include tardiness, missing class, using cell phones, and falling asleep. Effective relational techniques include making concerted efforts to question students about their lives while referring

students to sources of outside support for such concerns as financial aid, health issues, family problems, and legal problems. When several students in the same class have a similar problem, instead of sending them to see an advisor, [the professor has] the advisors visit the class. [Professors] have assembled a roster of resource people who are willing to visit classes and work with students on life problems (Adams et al., 2009, p. 63).

Another tenant of ALP is *mainstreaming*, an idea that has been used in other contexts and developmental programs. Mainstreaming usually encompasses putting basic skills students into transfer-level classes while offering additional supports like mandatory companion classes, lab sessions, tutors, and other variations (Illowsky et al., 2013). In the community college setting, and for ALP in particular, mainstreaming helps to reduce stigma (and feelings of inadequacy), a main problem with developmental writers (Adams et al., 2009). Researchers contend that mixing levels of students pushes the transfer-level writers to become role models for appropriate college level habits, as well as, showing how to effectively write. Researchers concluded "that the stigmatizing and demoralizing effects of placement in a course designed just for basic writers are greatly reduced by this feature" (Adams et al., 2009, p. 62).

Recent research shows that mandatory individual teacher/student conferences has significant benefits with community college male students of color (Wood, Harris, & White, 2015), and this is supportive of the most promising practices within the developmental writing population. A study about mandatory 15-minute student/teacher conferences over 13 weeks (as the only experimental factor) Fritts (1976) concluded that students made significant benefits in writing achievement. This is apparent in the success of the SWW and ALP models referenced earlier. The SWW model accomplishes this through weekly workshops with tutors and professors, and the ALP model achieves this through the design of a corequisite support class with limited student participants (Adams et al., 2009; Rigolino & Freel, 2007).

Implications for practice

This metasynthesis of existing research has implications for researchers, change agents, administrators, faculty, and students. This exploration emphasizes the complexity of basic skills initiatives and beliefs. While an exhaustive itemization of research was conducted for this article, it is possible

that not all the available literature was catalogued. Additional research is required so that ideas and innovations are gathered from all sources. Nevertheless, the four developmental writing domains (structural, curricular, andragogical, and relational) are represented in the research for this article.

Implication—use validated techniques

There are immense amounts of research on what practitioners are doing in the classroom; however, there is a very limited amount of validated research on what the most promising practices are, especially for community college students. When doing a search for validated techniques on writing, most of the information concentrates on traditional practices or K–12 and university students. Because community college students are a different audience than university students, the focus on research should change as well, and fortunately, it appears to be doing so.

Many of the current initiatives are addressing this issue. For example, Complete College America, Achieving the Dream, the Lumina Foundation, Community College Research Center (CCRC), and others have been focusing on improving developmental writing program outcomes. Also, focus on improving community college outcomes is part of state-wide reforms including Colorado, Indiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia. More needs to be done, and practitioners need to focus on and use all the most promising practices identified in this study.

Implication—stop using conjecture and tradition

This analysis revealed that there are many scholarly works and ideas being proliferated based upon opinion and conjecture, and not based upon real evidence about what needs to take place in developmental writing classrooms. As a result, this speculation has most likely had an influence on techniques that are taking place at community colleges. An area of significant concern is the potential effect this lack of research has on student success. Edgecombe et al. (2013) “found practitioners changing course structures, curricula, or pedagogical approaches without an empirical basis for their decisions—risking the implementation of reforms that may not address the underlying obstacles to student success” (p. 12). The data from my research validates this.

Educators may perceive their practices are in line with research, but they are essentially in line with written assumptions that are extended without evidence. As a result, practitioners and change agents have been left to their own devices to talk about what works without having any validated proof. Consequently, this speculation has significantly influenced practices at community colleges. Conjecture and opinion is not a good method to find what helps students succeed. This has most likely led to the current environment of long developmental pathways that are significant barriers to student success. This also helps explain why the focus of many English and writing programs is primarily on grammar, sentences, and paragraphs, as opposed to the more effective, validated techniques shown in the research, such as challenging college-level assignments and enrolling students directly into transfer-level English.

Implication—focus on the andragogical domain

Current studies are validating the intelligence and capability of developmental students. Research has shown that they can do the work when given the chance. What the most recent research is showing is that students need support in various ways to do challenging, college-level work. The people with the most direct and constant contact with students are professors. Therefore, it would make sense that the most effective way to help students is by refining the techniques of teachers. Edgecombe et al. (2013) contend that the most current reforms focus on structural and curricular changes because these are the easiest to implement. Andragogical reforms most likely will be met with resistance; however, these proposed changes might be some of the most important discussions to have. For example, individualized, detailed instruction and versatility/adaptability with instructional practice are art forms that take

much different skill sets than traditional approaches. These are difficult changes to make for educators, and some may be unwilling at first. Although resistance to reform is predicted, change agents need to help andragogical practices shift to the ones identified in this study for the benefit of the students.

Implication—focus on the relational domain

Similar to the andragogical domain, the very thing teachers and administrators have ignored for so long is now the centerpiece for successful developmental programs across the country. Paying attention to student's feelings has rewards. The visual framework for this article ([Figure 3](#)) emphasizes the relational domain as the foundational base of promising practices, and research confirms that connecting with developmental learners is paramount to building a successful college environment. In fact, researchers have known the significance of building relationships with students for decades (Roueche, 1981), so it is surprising to have taken this long to implement it into the developmental writing context. Also among the various domains examined, the relational domain was discussed most intensely by scholars as having the most salient effect on the student success in the classroom. Simply put, our relational practices need to change because positive student-teacher connections are significantly beneficial for persistence and retention. Educators need to understand that how they teach is just as important as what they teach, and they ought to use all the techniques revealed by this study.

Recommendations for future research

As noted earlier, many current initiatives are underway to help with the developmental pipeline. The findings discovered by this study reveal several possible opportunities for future research.

Recommendation—include all four domains

The purpose of future research should investigate how practitioners are serving students within each of the four domains. Structural and curricular domains already have the most focus. And while these areas are important, it has overshadowed the two other areas, andragogical and relational, which are known to have significant emphasis on student success (Liff, 2003; Smittle, 2003). Future researchers should balance this out and be more inclusive in nature while looking at all four domains when validating their studies.

Recommendation—relational and students of color

The most current research for students of color has shown that the most promising practices within andragogical and relational domains significantly increase student success, retention, and persistence. We need to apply that research in a new context, and explore how to more effectively target the relational needs of developmental writing students. More specifically, there is a lack of research as it relates to relationships and the relational domain. The emerging research with students of color in general has highlighted the importance of positive, affirming, and trusting relationships as being a predictor of their success (Wood et al., 2015). This literature base does not seem to be as dominant for developmental education and developmental writing in particular. Of course, this is a concern because students of color represent a high proportion of students in basic skills classes.

Conclusion

The research shows that the most promising practices for developmental writing programs are holistic in nature. Based on the amount of research, the most successful colleges look at their entire program from the macrolevel to the microlevel, from their institution's footprint to their students' needs. They examine their teaching practices and their assignments, and they are extremely reflective

with a willingness to retool what they do according to data. The ALP model from CCBC is the most researched, and possibly for good reason. Knowingly or unknowingly, the model was a redesign that included all four domains presented in my research. All developmental programs should at the minimum, follow suit, and expand on this holistic reform.

We need to look at the whole student, inside and outside of the classroom, and programs that reflect this will be the most successful. Educators and administrators involved in crafting and tweaking developmental writing programs practices within their college or state may find this analysis useful. I hope to change how colleges implement developmental writing practices so that practitioners will be given the best tools to help all students succeed.

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