INTRODUCTION

This Research Brief is a collaborative effort of the Office of Articulation & Research and members of the English faculty. Students in developmental composition courses are under-prepared for the reading and writing challenges they face at the college level. Often passive learners, they do not question what they read, are unfamiliar with the conventions of written discourse, and have a limited understanding of the reading and writing processes necessary for academic success.

Since more than two-thirds of CSM students begin in our college’s developmental writing program, we have considered ways to most effectively meet the needs of these students. The English department, with the assistance of Milla McConnell-Tuite, CSM Institutional Advancement Officer, developed a research project to assess the effectiveness of the developmental writing program and create and assess an integrated reading-writing course. Loren Barroca and James Carranza served as project directors.

The impetus to explore the teaching of reading, writing, and learning as interdependent elements has been inspired by current research and theory in the fields of composition and reading and the innovative developmental writing courses at major universities, state colleges, and community colleges across the nation—University of Pittsburgh, ULCA, San Francisco State University, Michigan State University, Chabot College.

In order to develop an integrated reading-writing curriculum, the project team secured a Fund for Instructional Improvement (FII) research grant from the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office for 2001-02 and 2002-03. This project, “The Reading-Writing Connection: An Approach to Integrated, Pre-Transfer Level Composition and Reading Instruction,” followed an earlier FII research grant, “Understanding the Developing Writer” (1999-2001). Both grants provided critical financial support (more than $220,000) toward CSM’s efforts to improve the developmental writing program by underwriting faculty reassigned time, professional development activities, curricular resources, and institutional research.

The primary grant objectives were as follows:

(1) Assess the effectiveness of the developmental composition program and curricula
(2) Solicit input from faculty and students about the program
(3) Conduct an inventory of scholarship and research regarding “best practices” employed in existing integrated reading-writing programs
(4) Create and assess an integrated reading-writing course

This project has had profound effects on how English faculty and instructional administrators at CSM perceive the teaching of developmental composition. The research and data collected by the project team have provided important insights into how to better serve developmental writing students through program assessment and evaluation.

STUDY DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

To assess the effect of an integrated reading-writing course, the team needed to establish a student performance “baseline.” That is, how have students performed with a traditional developmental curriculum in
which reading and writing courses have been taught as distinct components? This called for an analysis of student academic performance in English and reading coursework prior to and after the implementation of the integrated curriculum—covering a period of eight years (Fall 1996 – Spring 2002)—and tracking the academic progress of more than 9,000 students. It is important to note that in Fall 1999, READ 801 and 802 were established as prerequisites for English composition courses. The data collection period established includes student performance pre- and post-READ prerequisites.

In addition to academic performance data in English and reading coursework, the project team identified the following sources of information as useful in analyzing the efficacy of the developmental writing program:

- Demographic profile of developmental students
- English assessment test results of first-time developmental students, initial course placement success rates, and subsequent success rates in the sequence of English and Reading courses leading to ENGL 100
- Surveys of faculty and students
- Focus groups with faculty and students
- Individual interviews with faculty
- Bibliographic inventory of research in teaching reading and writing
- Inventory of “best practices” in the teaching of developmental composition

This information informed the following programmatic changes. The English department:

- Revised the developmental writing lab curriculum
- Developed new curriculum for developmental English courses
- Pilot tested an experimental integrated reading-writing course
- Restructured the developmental writing program
- Organized professional development activities and workshops on teaching composition and reading
- Organized teaching circles to support faculty experimentation with curriculum
- Created a partnership with Multicultural Center counselors to increase student access to counseling and support services.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Using the Fall 1999 term (when Reading 802 was added as a prerequisite for English 100) as the demarcation for pre- vs. post-analyses, the team compared course completion and persistence rates for Fall 1996 - Summer 1999 with Fall 1999 - Spring 2002 outcomes [see figure 1]. This comparison revealed the following:

- English 800 completion rates remained virtually identical in the pre- and post-periods (59.3% vs. 59.2%)
- The proportion of ENGL 800 completers subsequently enrolling in ENGL 100 declined by 35% during the post-analysis period (94.3% vs. 59.9%)
The proportion of ENGL 800 completers who subsequently completed ENGL 100 with a grade of “A,” “B,” or “C” increased 7.5 percentage points (77.0% vs. 84.5%). Overall, the percentage of students who began in English 800 that successfully completed English 100 decreased by 13% in the three years after instituting the prerequisite (43.1% vs. 29.9%).

These data clearly indicate that a significant drop in ENGL 800 to ENGL 100 persistence occurred with the imposition of the Reading 802 prerequisite. In order to more deeply understand the relationship between these two events, the team participated in several qualitative data-gathering efforts which included student surveys, student focus groups, and individual interviews with faculty.

The survey responses of nearly 1000 ENGL 800 and READ 802 students revealed the following information regarding student perceptions of the developmental writing program:

- 79% of ENGL 800/READ 802 students favored either an integrated or linked reading-writing course as a means of fulfilling their reading and writing prerequisites for ENGL 100.
- 39% of ENGL 800/READ 802 students felt that there was little or no connection between their English and Reading courses.

Student focus groups further probed student perceptions of English 800 and Reading 802. Focus group participants responded to six questions addressing general perceptions about reading and writing, as well as specific experiences related to the usefulness of discrete reading and writing curricula. Students noted the lack of connection between reading and writing instruction. Similarly, students supported the idea of a combined reading-writing course as a more desirable mode of instruction.

**CONCLUSION**

Current composition and reading research indicates that reading and writing are best taught in tandem and as purposeful acts of communication. Students make faster gains in language proficiency and critical thinking ability when curricula integrate reading and writing. While it may seem logical to separate reading instruction from writing instruction and to teach both in a skills-oriented, prescriptive fashion—as some college-level “remedial” courses still do—we contend that this traditional “skills” approach does not adequately develop students’ reading and writing processes nor nurture the critical thinking skills essential to effective college-level reading and writing. Rather than teach reading, writing, and critical thinking as discrete skills, we recommend using an integrated approach that actively engages students in their own learning, focuses on the processes inherent to both reading and writing, and articulates the connections between them.

The experimental curriculum was first implemented in Spring 2002 with a pilot-testing of the curriculum components to be used in the first integrated reading-writing course. In Fall 2002, two sections of the experimental course—English 887—were offered; in Spring 2003 four sections were offered. Beginning Fall 2003, the integrated course is offered as English 838.

In light of the research findings, the English department has made significant changes to the College’s developmental writing program and course curricula. The program now integrates reading, writing, critical thinking, and community-building instruction and increases student access to student resources and support services.

Future research will track student academic performance in all developmental English courses as well as student performance in experimental sections. Data to be gathered and analyzed will include initial course completion rates, persistence into and subsequent successful course completion of ENGL 100, and subsequent enrollment in ENGL 110 and ENGL 165.

Grant documents and additional information about this research project can be found at: [http://www.smccd.net/accounts/csmrwc/index.html](http://www.smccd.net/accounts/csmrwc/index.html). Or contact the project co-directors, Loren Barroca, 574-6554 and James Carranza, 574-6568.