

Enhanced Student Learning Through Collaboration Between Learning Support and the Classroom Teacher

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During the Fall Semester 1998, East Georgia College opened a Learning Support Center designed to provide academic assistance, especially for students who were enrolled in writing, mathematics, and reading classes. Because the Learning Support Center was a new endeavor, the instructors at the center and some of the instructors from the English Department wanted to find ways to encourage students to use the services that the Center would provide. Many of East Georgia's students are first-generation college students, and the idea of seeking tutorial assistance is an uncomfortable or unfamiliar one at best.

In an effort to improve student learning in composition classes and to promote student use, Dr. Pestana, of the English Department, and Dr. Nielsen, of the Learning Support Center, decided to work together in establishing an open line of communication between the center and the classroom. All too often, learning support labs function in isolation of the classroom teacher. Seldom do students seek help voluntarily; they are more likely sent for help. However, in most cases, after the student receives help, the instructor does not receive specific and regular feedback from the college's learning center concerning what took place during the tutorial sessions.

In their collaborative working relationship, Dr. Pestana strongly encouraged student use of the services at the center by providing positive incentives for doing so. One particularly effective incentive was the addition of extra points to an essay score if the student did supplemental exercises that focused on errors made in the student's essay. This incentive was open to all students in her Developmental English and Composition I classes and had the positive effect of motivating even the better students to improve their skills and their scores. In return, the staff at the center provided weekly feedback to the professor concerning the types of problems for which students sought help. Thus, a positive, reciprocal relationship was established to the benefit of students, the Learning Support Center, and the classroom teacher.

In this on-going environment of communication, Dr. Pestana would identify types of errors that students were making on tests and essays. The student, then, would bring to the center the graded test or essay with specific errors identified—such as subject/verb agreement, choppy sentence structure, and weak development. Dr. Nielsen would create or find appropriate exercises to

remedy the specified errors, and students would complete these exercises at the center. In addition, Dr. Nielsen and the student tutors would identify common problems that they saw in rough drafts that Dr. Pestana's students would bring to the Learning Support Center. For instance, many students in the Developmental English classes had difficulty with essay structure and paragraph unity. Dr. Nielsen would then discuss these emerging student problems with Dr. Pestana, who would, in turn, reemphasize or reteach the concepts in her classes. Throughout the semester, Dr. Nielsen and Dr. Pestana engaged in discussions of student learning, isolating and targeting areas for instruction and remediation. In short, students benefited from mutual reinforcement of composition and grammar instruction in both the classroom and the center.

Assessment

At the end of the Fall Semester, Dr. Nielsen and Dr. Pestana examined a number of variables to determine student success. These included CPE pass rates for her two Developmental English classes, successful course completion for her Composition I classes, and student perceptions of the usefulness of the Learning Support Center's services.

Results of the assessment were very encouraging for all of Dr. Pestana's classes. In her two Developmental English classes, 83 to 88% of the students successfully passed the English portion of the CPE, and in her Composition I classes, all students who sought assistance more than twice during the 16-week semester successfully passed.

In addition, student perceptions of Learning Support Center services were favorable as well. All 50 students who received help for English throughout the semester were asked to complete an assessment of services provided by the center. Surveys were completed and returned by 45 students for a 90% completion rate. All students agreed that the English tutors and staff were helpful to them, and all 30 students who completed grammar exercises at the center found these exercises to be helpful to their understanding of English usage. Students were also very positive about the clarity of explanations offered by tutors and staff, with over 95% of the students responding that the quality of explanations was good to very good.

Benefits of Collaborative Instruction

A number of benefits emerged from this collaborative arrangement. Staff at the Learning

Support Center benefited from Dr. Pestana's feedback by receiving guidance in the preparation of lab materials specifically designed to meet the needs of these particular students. Dr. Pestana's encouragement of students to use the services helped ensure the success of the Learning Support Center in its opening semester. Students benefited through the identification of problems and misunderstandings before the instructor graded their essays, and they benefited by completing exercises that focused on their own particular weaknesses. Moreover, the instructor benefited by receiving on-going, constructive feedback on students' weaknesses and misunderstandings, enabling her to take corrective action in the classroom and thus decreasing the chance of student failure. One additional benefit to this

collaborative effort was the reduction in time spent grading revised essays. While having students revise their essays is important, the advent of the student failure. One additional benefit to this collaborative effort was the reduction in time spent in semester system has made continuous revision unmanageable for instructors who face the real possibility of teaching five composition courses each term. Substituting guided and focused practice at the Learning Support Center in place of simply revising corrected essays for the instructor to read again made the instructor's workload a little more manageable without compromising student instruction. This collaborative undertaking reinforces the obvious-but often unpracticed-idea that student learning can be enhanced when everyone works together.