

# Integrating Reading, Writing and Research for First-Year College Students: Piloting Linked Courses in the Education Major

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KEENE STATE COLLEGE

This chapter discusses Keene State College's *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*, a pilot program that offers a cohort of first-year Education majors the opportunity to take two linked courses across the academic year. The first semester Education course focuses on reading and research strategies, college expectations and pre-professional dispositions, and accessing campus resources. The second semester course focuses on integrating reading, writing, and research strategies in the required first-year composition course, and this same cohort of Education majors work on researching and writing individual semester-long research projects. Both courses are designed to encourage students to connect their learning across courses, to improve their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills, and to form systems of support with classmates and professors to help them transition into college. The Education professors who team-teach these courses and the first-year writing coordinator detail the history, implementation, and future of this initiative, share resources that they have developed to help students in this program to transition from high school to college-level work, and discuss what students who have been part of this initiative have said about their learning through focus groups.

## Creating Keene State College's *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*

Keene State College (KSC) is a public, liberal arts college in the small New Hampshire city of Keene, with a population of approximately 5,000 students. The majority of this population is undergraduates; 41 percent are first-generation college students, and ten percent receive services from the Office of Disability Services. In 2007, KSC launched a new general education program called the Integrative Studies Program (ISP). Integrative Thinking and Writing (ITW) 101, the new first-year composition course required of all incoming students, became one of two foundational courses in the ISP, the other foundational course focusing on quantitative

literacy. ITW 101 replaced a more traditional English 101 Essay Writing course, the original course including essay assignments in various genres, including personal narratives, critical analysis, and a researched essay; ITW 101, conceived of as a themed course proposed and developed by each instructor, asks students to work on just one sustained and extensive researched essay across the semester. As they engage in reading and discussion at the beginning of an ITW semester, students develop creative and complex questions to research, and write multiple drafts of a longer inquiry-based essay. Students learn together the value of ongoing and constructive feedback through in-class workshops, peer reviews, and writing conferences with faculty. The course is capped at 20 students, to keep the size small for a writing course, and 55–60 sections are offered each year, split evenly across two semesters.

Another key difference between English 101 and ITW 101, was that English 101 was taught exclusively by full-time and adjunct faculty in the English Department, while ITW can be taught by faculty across disciplines and departments. This intentional design fosters a campus-wide commitment to the teaching of writing, at least for faculty teaching first-year students. Faculty who are interested in teaching ITW develop a course theme proposal in which they discuss both the content and key questions of the course, and also how they would guide students through the process of developing a semester-long research and writing project.

In the 2012–13 academic year, Tanya and Darrell, two Education faculty members, proposed a yearlong pilot program, linking a new experimental Education course on critical reading with a new ITW course on educational reform. In this chapter, we will discuss the implementation of what we called *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*, integrating the teaching of critical thinking, reading, research and writing for a cohort of first-year Education majors. Part of the rationale for this program was that, while the college offered a challenging and rich inquiry-based writing course, Tanya and Darrell had noted that their incoming education students lacked the reading and research skills that they needed to be successful, not only in ITW, but also in their other college courses, including those in their intended major. In addition to providing explicit teaching of reading, research, and writing strategies, this two-semester initiative invites first-year education majors to enter into conversations about current issues in educational reform by reading, researching, and writing about educational debates, and by discussing those debates with other classmates, their professors, the campus community beyond the classroom, and local educators and community leaders. Students in the program become familiar with some of the language and genres used by scholars in the field, and they begin to use this language in their courses and to develop strategies to help them read and write at the college level.

To implement this initiative, now in its fourth year, incoming Education students receive an invitation to participate in the program. The first 25–35 volunteers are enrolled in a required foundational course in the education program and the Fall Reading and Writing in Education course. The reading course focuses on

integrating reading, research, and writing strategies, understanding college expectations, exploring pre-professional dispositions, and accessing resources on campus. During the second semester, this same cohort of students takes the required ITW 101 course, with the same instructors guiding them through the processes of formulating research questions, researching, outlining, and writing, revising, and editing drafts of longer inquiry-based essays. Both courses are designed to provide opportunities for students to improve and integrate their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills, to connect their learning across courses within and beyond their major, and to form systems of support with a cohort of classmates and professors to help them transition into college.

## College Induction, Retention, and Literacy Challenges

The transition, retention, and success of incoming first-year students continue to be topics of serious discussion and concern in higher education and certainly at our institution (Odom, 2014; Reeves, 2010; Tinto, 1998). As the editors of this book discuss in their Introduction, the literacy skills, particularly with regard to reading, essential for successful transition from secondary education to higher education is an area of study that has recently gained serious scholarly attention (Horning, 2007; Kirby, 2007; Rachal, Daigle, & Rachal, 2007; Young & Potter, 2013; Carillo, 2015). College students are often challenged by the volume and complexity of reading that is expected of them across different areas of study (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2011). They may lack good experience or instruction with how to engage in reading more complex texts or unfamiliar genres (Odom, 2014). Typically, children learn and master reading in the primary and early secondary grades; however, any gaps in reading skill development may not have prepared them for reading at the college level, resulting in students who “don’t, won’t, [or] can’t” do the reading for their classes (Horning, 2007). In using the term “college-level” in connection with reading, we have developed the following definition, and based on our work with students in the linked course initiative: college-level readers construct meaning by monitoring, through writing and discussion, their understanding of the texts they are reading, enhancing understanding by making connections to prior knowledge and previously learned material, acquiring and actively using what they have learned, and developing insights that they can draw on in discussing and writing about these texts. To develop these college-level reading skills, students need to learn and master strategies like comprehension monitoring, summarizing, use of graphic and semantic organizers to engage them in critical reading and in their learning (Kamil, 2003; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development & National Institute for Literacy, 2007; Nokes & Dole, 2004). When educational institutions or programs such as the *Reading, Thinking,*

and *Writing Initiative*, target the explicit teaching of such skills, students will play a substantially more active role in their own academic development and achievement (Elton, 2010; Taraban, Kerr, & Rynearson, 2004). Over time, successful college-level readers come to see the importance of reading in academic inquiry, research, and writing, and that these processes should be integrated.

Although primary and secondary schools often address these literacy skills separately, the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing was demonstrated through composition research during the 1980s and 1990s (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, & Peck, 1990; Lindemann & Tate, 1993). Patricia Harkin (2005) notes that returning to and building on this work (as scholars have done recently) can help us to understand more about *how* readers make meaning, so that we can better understand how to integrate the teaching of reading and writing (p. 422). One book that Harkin mentions, and that seems especially relevant to the concerns raised by faculty at our institution regarding students' issues with integrating their reading and writing, is Linda Flower et al.'s *Reading-to-Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process* (1990). Harkin describes this book as "a thoughtful and comprehensive account of interconnections between reading and writing processes" (p. 417).

Flower et al.'s study and findings raise key issues about the integration of reading and writing that are relevant in current conversations, especially for the initiative we're discussing in this chapter. Flower defines *reading-to-write* as "the goal-directed activity of reading in order to write" and that "Each process is altered by the other" (pp. 5–6); this concept offers insight into how students read differently for different purposes. Based on their study documenting a group of first-year students as they negotiated the complexities of reading and writing in college, Flower et al. argue that in *reading-to-write* "The reading process is guided by the need to produce a text of one's own. The reader as writer is expected to manipulate information and transform it to his or her own purposes. And the writing process is complicated by the need to shape one's own goals in response to the ideas or even the purposes of another writer" (p. 6). Flower et al. demonstrate that, from the interpretation of the assignment itself to the final product, students are constantly working to frame and reframe the nature of the writing project itself, and how their reading impacts their thinking and writing.

The ITW 101 course at KSC requires students to do a great deal of reading-to-write as they work on their sustained writing projects, though reading is not usually discussed or defined in the ways that Flower et al. discuss. Faculty teaching the course regularly talk together about what strategies could help students to read more critically, more in-depth, and more carefully. Reading has always been a priority in ITW 101, at least in terms of the first-year program's student learning outcomes, which include the following three reading outcomes:

- Use reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating

- Analyze and evaluate the rhetorical features of peer and published texts (audience, thesis or main argument, quality of evidence, structure)
- Understand the importance of reading in academic inquiry and research

However, given that ITW is a one-semester first-year composition course, faculty teaching in the program have found it challenging to balance teaching reading, critical thinking, writing and information literacy outcomes. Discussions about helping students to learn to read with a purpose, to develop, focus, and refine their ideas and overall arguments through the reading that they do have emerged more recently. As faculty raise concerns about students' increasing difficulties with weaving research into their writing, we've turned to current research on reading pedagogy to help guide our thinking and curricular revisions.

As a year-long experience, the KSC Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative represents our initial efforts to provide students with more time to learn how to integrate their reading, research and writing more fully within a specific disciplinary context. To help students reflect on their growing understanding of the integrated nature of these processes, we ask them to consider how their approaches to reading different types of texts have played a part in their prior (and current) writing and researching experiences. We also ask students, at various points across the year, to discuss and write about how their reading, which is primarily focused on educational reform, has impacted their developing understanding of the field itself and their thinking about their developing research projects. This reflective work, achieved through class discussions and reading logs, among other strategies, builds on the metacognitive work used in earlier reading research of the 1980s and 1990s, and more recent discussions about the value of reflecting on and analyzing texts using a variety of reading approaches, such as Ellen C. Carillo's concept of "mindful reading." Carillo argues that mindful reading helps students "become knowledgeable, deliberate, and reflective about how they read and the demands that contexts place on their reading" (pp. 10–11). Noting David Russell's point that in order for students to understand disciplinary contexts and conventions, they need to participate in that discipline, Carillo states that first-year writing instructors can help students to try, to "experiment with and reflect on which reading practices work more productively in various contexts" (pp. 15–16). Because KSC's Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative focuses on the field of education and first-year education majors, and is taught by Education professors, the genre conventions and reading approaches that would be most effective or appropriate in this context are a constant point of discussion in class.

Another key reflective element of the Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative includes a series of focus groups with students who participated in the year-long program, during that first year and, as a way to track students' reflections on the impact of the program in their academic career, in each subsequent year until

graduation. To ethically collect this data, as well as data from students' literacy autobiographies and other writing samples, we have submitted annual IRB proposals and received exempt status. Despite the exemption, we provided a verbal overview of our project to students and collected consent forms from each cohort. In addition to what students reported in focus groups, we reviewed samples of students' written work and their overall performances in their college courses to consider whether their reading and writing skills were improving over time, in various courses including those in their majors. Through this research, some of which we will share in this chapter, we are working to better understand the ways in which reading and writing are linked and to contribute to current trends in educational and composition research regarding reading at the college level (McGonnell, Parilla, & Deacon, 2007; Young & Potter, 2013; Carillo, 2015).

## Understanding Prior Knowledge in Teaching Today's College Students

Education and composition research suggests that while reading and writing are connected and should be integrated, these skills are typically addressed separately in primary and secondary schools, and reading is often under-addressed at the post-secondary level (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Scholes, 2002; Kirby, 2007; Rachal, Daigle, & Rachal, 2007; Hong-Nam & Swanson, 2011). To learn about our students' prior experiences learning to read and write in schools, we drew on a familiar genre in FYC courses, the literacy autobiography. We wanted to hear how students described their developing literacy, and whether their descriptions would support the notion that explicit instruction on reading receded as instruction about writing became more emphasized. Also, creating a profile of the students from this generation had to be considered before we could fully address how to teach reading to our undergraduate students. The prior schooling experiences of today's college students have changed with the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001). NCLB reform and subsequent reform efforts such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative to our public school system, with its emphasis on standards and testing, greatly affected the reading and writing experiences of the current generation of students entering college.

In her chapter in this collection, Mary Lou Odom notes that students' prior reading experiences involve "texts that are less linear and permanent, more dynamic and multimodal, and that require greater agency on students' parts" than most college reading requires; Odom argues that we need to learn more about how students are reading when they come to college, so that we know how to help them negotiate college-level reading expectations more successfully. In the literacy narrative, we ask students to reflect on their elementary, middle, and high school experiences with

reading and writing. Below is an overview of the themes that emerged from these autobiographies.

## Autobiography

Students reported having fond memories of their reading and writing experiences in the primary grades. Several reported being more engaged in school and in the joy of learning how to read. For example, one student stated, “When I first started to read, it was so new and fascinating that I wanted to read all the time.” Many felt that their teachers liked and cared for them, noting that these teachers encouraged them to be creative with their work and made learning fun across subject areas. Students’ memories of reading in elementary school ranged from keeping reading logs listing the books they’d read to more “hands on” read-aloud and reading comprehension activities in class. Students also reported that their families were very involved in supporting their early reading efforts. One student shared, “My mom made it a requirement to read every day, at least 20 minutes until 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Even in the summers, she made me pick a bunch of books and I would get a reward for reading all of them by the end of the summer.” While some students talked about struggling with reading and writing early on, overall, reading and writing in elementary school was enjoyable. But, as students progressed through the grades, struggling with reading and writing became more prevalent.

For most students, the transition to middle school required more independent reading and writing. In terms of the curriculum, students’ stories highlighted the separation of reading and writing; most students noted that, by the end of middle school, explicit instruction on writing took precedence over reading instruction. Because there was less conversation about literacy processes in the classroom, some students reported that middle school is when they began to receive additional support for their reading. Those receiving additional support in reading felt that needing this support marked them as being deficient in their literacy development, an association that they felt became part of their identity as learners. One student shared, “My IEP (Individualized Education Plan) haunted me throughout middle school.” Others who had negative experiences with reading and writing in middle school noted that it’s likely they would have benefitted from additional support, because they were unaware until much later that they were actually a bit behind in both areas.

Many students reported having positive relationships with their middle school teachers, saying that those teachers were influential and inspiring with regard to their reading and writing development; these teachers served as sponsors of students’ literacy, offering the more positive elements of Deborah Brandt’s (1998) definition of sponsors as those who “enable, support, teach, and model” literacy (p. 166). Several students shared stories about one or two specific teachers who

made writing an enjoyable experience by using creative activities and approaches in class. One student stated, “My favorite teacher made learning fun, so it didn’t matter what or how much we read or wrote about. I’ve always liked reading for fun, but when it came to school books, I procrastinated a lot because I just didn’t want to read them and take notes on a book I didn’t want to read in the first place.” By middle school, expectations about reading changed, focusing more on the number of books that students read rather than their engagement with these texts. Students talked about a marked shift in reading instruction, moving from learning *how to read* more complex texts and new genres or discussing whether students were understanding what they were reading to an assumption that comprehension, analysis, and synthesis were naturally occurring. This shift persisted and deepened as students moved to high school.

Many students reported that they had difficulties transitioning to high school due to increased academic challenges. Some attributed the challenges to personal issues that occurred outside of the school context or teachers who didn’t seem to be invested in teaching them the increased literacy skills they needed. Many students reported being overwhelmed with the number of books they were expected to read and as a result, some avoided reading altogether. One student stated, “Once I got to high school, it got a whole lot worse; the books became harder and harder as I got older and there were more books every year.” Another student shared, “In high school is when it all went downhill; my papers were always ‘C’ quality. I used a lot of run-on sentences, never knew where to put commas, colons, and semicolons. I didn’t know how to incorporate “big words” into my papers; I would use ‘nice’, ‘good’ instead of ‘extravagant’ or ‘awesome.’ Most of the sentences were incomplete and the paper didn’t flow.” Like in middle school, several students reported receiving additional support or tutoring to improve their reading and writing skills. For most, reading and writing instruction in high school shifted to vocabulary building and writing research papers without a great deal of attention on how to break down and accomplish these tasks.

## Engaging Students in College-Level Reading and Thinking

The goals of the first-year linked course initiative are to build on and develop students’ reading, thinking, research, and writing skills through guided instruction, class activities/assignments, strategies and resources, and on-going feedback. As Mary Odom points out in her chapter in this volume, “students who have not developed reading strategies appropriate for extracting and processing meaning from college texts will struggle to complete both reading *and* writing tasks.” In the area of reading, the goal of comprehension is to construct meaning. Students construct meaning by monitoring their understanding of the materials they are reading, en-



hancing understanding by making connections to prior knowledge and previously learned material, acquiring and actively using what they have learned, and developing insight. In addition, students need to learn the content through reading as well as the process of how to learn and understand the material (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Because students need multiple opportunities to engage in these learning experiences to increase their academic success, the strategies we've developed through this initiative provide students with tools they need to become active readers, to understand and write about complex content and theoretical concepts, and to increase participation in classroom discussions.

To help students become what John Bean (2011) calls “deep readers” who “focus on meaning” and “interact with texts, devoting psychological energy to the task” and who understand the integration of reading and writing, we created a textbook reading guide (Appendix A) that leads students through pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies (p. 162). Students use the whole guide in the beginning, with the understanding that as they internalize the process through repeated use of the guide, they can modify it later to meet their individual course note-taking needs. The textbook reading guide starts with asking students to review headings and subheadings before predicting the focus of the chapter. The guide includes sections for students to take notes, and to write down questions that arise and terms or concepts to know while they are reading. After finishing the reading, students write a two-to-three sentence summary, and questions to ask a classmate or the professors.

Overall, the textbook reading guide applies a lower stakes “writing to read” approach that Chris Anson defines as “a reciprocal model of reading and writing that sees them as intertwined” (this volume). The guide asks students to return to the text multiple times, building on concepts of previewing, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing that aid students through the reading process (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2011). According to the 2011 National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE, 2011), only 60% of first-year students reported taking careful notes while reading. This reading guide provides a format for students to take notes and ask questions of each text. We include a summary as part of the guide to help students build their mastery of the material, focus on the important content of the text, and restate the main points in their own words (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development & National Institute for Literacy, 2007). Bean notes that asking students to write summaries allows them to locate “the hierarchical structure of an article” and to help them focus on the writer’s key points (p. 178). The textbook reading guide serves as a tool to engage students in the reading process by providing a graphic organizer that creates a visual representation of the text’s content and identifies relationships among the ideas, concepts, and information in the text (Kamil, 2003; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development & National Institute for Literacy, 2007).

After teaching the students how to use the reading guide with textbooks, we focus on teaching students how to read scholarly articles. This class activity draws on students' extracurricular reading experiences, beginning with asking them to bring in magazines they like to read, and discussing differences between the ways that they read for pleasure versus the ways that they read for classes. We ask students to select an article from their magazine to read silently during class. Afterwards, they share summaries of the articles and what they observed about each article's organizational structure. Next, to introduce a more complex text that is by educators for an audience of educators, we hand out teacher practitioner journals. Students choose an article of interest and read it in class, again silently. The students again share summaries of the articles and compare and contrast the organizational structure. Finally, we hand out educational research journals to the students and again, they select an article of interest and complete the tasks as described above, followed by a discussion comparing and contrasting all three articles. To acknowledge the students' concerns about comprehending the research articles, we spend time breaking down the organizational structure of the article together, and discussing a variety of reading approaches and strategies that students can try to read the article. After this activity, our students note that they feel less overwhelmed about reading scholarly articles for class.

Many educators will have used a version of a reading guide such as the one described above to help their students develop a cache of reading strategies that they might choose from, depending on the context and type of reading task. Another essential element of the reading process that is not often discussed, but that we like to emphasize with our students, is how they position their bodies when they read. As students read the magazine, teacher practitioner, and scholarly articles in the above in-class activities, we also ask them to pay attention to how they sit while reading each article. During our class discussions, students share their realization that shifting their body position, specifically how and where they sit, can affect how they engage with, understand, or even complete the texts they are reading. This discussion often reveals to students that their habits can help or hinder their academic success. In reflecting on her changed practice, one student, for instance, shared she was now less anxious at the prospect of reading a scholarly article; she noted that, in a first read-through of an article, she chooses to sit comfortably in her favorite reading chair, and in her second read-through, she sits at her desk, ready to take notes. Through this process, she enhanced her overall reading experience, her understanding of the material, and how she felt when she began to read. In focus groups, several students cited this in-class activity in convincing them that body position and other environmental factors such as physical study environment are essential parts of the reading process to consider.

For most college students, reading aloud is something that they stopped doing in elementary school. But, because we are working with future educators of

children, one of the things that they will be doing daily is reading aloud. Reading aloud is also an important strategy for comprehension. To reacquaint students with the value of reading aloud, we have students select a children's book to bring to class and read to their classmates. While each student reads aloud, we provide feedback on the student's pace, tone, projection, clarity, ability to connect with the audience, and to consider the rhetorical situation of the book (its intended audience, purpose, context, etc.). We extend this opportunity to more challenging college-level texts, asking students to read scholarly articles aloud in class, but the goal is the same, to help students consider reading aloud as a strategy to aid in (or identify lack of) comprehension.

Another class activity that engages students in understanding and exploring college-level reading is the book club that we start during class. We select a book for the class book club, setting the expectation that as college students and future teachers, they have a responsibility to be (or to become) avid, critical readers. Each week, students read a chapter from the book and submit a reflection on what they read that includes their thoughts, opinions, and connections to life experiences. During in-class book club discussions, we teach the students how to take the lead in sharing their thoughts, opinions, and reflections on these chapters with each other. We ask them to tell the class what page they are referencing and to give examples that support their points. When students finish talking, they say the name of a classmate who wants to share next, building on each other's comments. The students learn that their voice and opinions have power when they can articulate their understanding of the material with supporting evidence from the reading or their own life experiences; this class experience creates an environment in which reading once again becomes an enjoyable process that leads to dialogue and to learning. Our goal in the book club experience is to help students to understand why reading should be a part of their lives, not just something they have to do.

Because, as we've noted earlier, summarizing is a proven effective comprehension strategy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007) that students often struggle to master, one final assignment that we'll describe here is the research notes assignment (Appendix B). This assignment, which builds on students' newly established familiarity with reading guides, asks them to write two-sentence summaries for each source they're reading for their research projects. The overall goal of this guide is to help students work on analyzing their sources and begin synthesizing their developing ideas about the argument they want to make. Practically-speaking, the guide asks students to write the reference citation at the top (in APA format for Education), a summary of the article, book, or website, paraphrased notes or quotes, and finally, keywords, topics, or citations they want to research next. The students use the research notes guide for every source in their research paper. These notes help students to organize and synthesize their research and to begin drafting their essays. By the end of the first semester, students have ten research notes completed on their educational

topic of interest. At the beginning of second semester, we have the students reread their research notes and weave the information together in a written overview of what they have gathered thus far. This overview assignment asks students to reflect on what they have read in their own words, analyze where the gaps are in their research, and plan their next steps in the research process. In the following section, we will share what students have said in focus groups about what they've learned from using this guide and the other strategies we've discussed.

## Focus Group Data

For four years of the *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*, Tanya and Darrell have conducted two focus group meetings with each student cohort to gather data on their transition to college and on the strategies and resources they have learned in the program that they've found beneficial. Based on the data from these focus groups, the program continues to improve, as we've been able to identify which in-class activities, strategies and assignments students have found most useful and why. As Wardle (2007) has argued, focus group data can help researchers understand what students emphasize about their learning and how they describe transferring literacy skills across contexts and to identify areas for further study. Considering college-level reading in particular, we have analyzed the focus group transcripts for themes emerging from the students' voices. We summarized four years' worth of data into three major categories: transition to college, the relationship between college reading, thinking, and writing, and the impact of strategies and resources taught in the program.

### Transition to College

The main themes that emerged when students shared their struggles with transitioning to college were unrealistic college expectations, inefficient time management, and the social demands and distractions of college. Students reported having difficulties adjusting to the less structured college schedule, noting that they were more used to the scheduled lifestyle of high school, with full days spent in classes, and afternoons and evenings spent in after-school activities or on nightly homework. They shared how having classes once or twice a week affected their time management and their ability to remember what they had to do and by when. With so many readings and assignments to complete prior to class time, and without personal connections with professors like those they had developed with their high school teachers, many students reported being unsure about how to manage the volume of the workload and unsure about who to ask for help.

Many students talked about anxiety over courses with grades based on just a mid-term and a final. These stressors were compounded by the fact that they could no longer study in their rooms, since socializing, music, television, and their roommates easily distracted them from schoolwork. Students noted that learning how to be self-motivated to balance their academic and social lives was, in itself, a significant challenge in their transition to college. Due to these distractions, students reported having to search for new places to study across campus, including the library, residence hall study areas, and even the laundry room. As they adjusted to new academic demands, students also talked about having to learn how to communicate with roommates, to make new friends, and to get enough sleep, factors that often affected and complicated their daily lives, and, in some cases, their academic success.

Time management was a universal theme mentioned in the focus groups. Students came from highly structured high school environments to a college setting where classes do not fill each day. When they did not have class at eight in the morning, students stayed up late, socializing. They reported having to learn how to set schedules that prioritized being prepared for classes and completing assignments, so they did not fall behind in their coursework. One student said,

There are a lot of those classes where you will go into class and the teacher will just reiterate everything you read. So the week before, when you are saying should I read for that class that I am just going to relearn everything in or should I do this other assignment, sometimes you have to choose that the other assignment takes precedence because you know, by that point, I really do not have to read that chapter because it will not apply to my next class.

Students who were successful in completing their reading talked about learning to chunk their assignments, making checklists to break down the assignments into smaller tasks.

## Integrating College Reading, Thinking and Writing

In the focus groups, students reflected on how their approaches toward reading impacted their ability to understand and complete their assignments. Some students shared that they could still succeed in high school by just skimming books, but that in college, if they did not complete and understand the reading, they were largely unprepared for class discussions and quizzes. In addition, they realized that reading for class helped them to understand the course content, especially given that the content itself was more complex and the reading more extensive.

To learn how to read critically, students said that they needed to figure out how to organize their thoughts, their reading styles, and take useful notes on the

important points in an assigned reading. One student shared how, at first, she did not know what notes to take.

I feel like I never used to be able to pick out the important points. When we would have to do notes from a textbook, I would write too much. I would not really know what was important. The first semester [of the linked program], we focused on how much you do not need. You need to know the main points and how to take notes. That was really helpful. Now I can pick out the important points and not overload.

Other students found that their reading skills, especially identifying key questions, points or arguments, grew stronger after they learned what to look for in the reading.

To help them practice what to look for in the reading, students cited the textbook reading and research notetaking guides as two being most useful. By learning how textbooks and articles were organized, for instance, students said that it was easier to locate the important points in readings. These resources, students told us, served as a starting point in helping them to rethink and expand their reading process to include pre-reading strategies like skimming in order to grasp what an article was about and then, in a more careful read-through, deciding how to organize the information that they had read in a useful way. The reading and research notetaking guides helped students to develop a framework for identifying and summarizing key points in a text and expanding their overall reading process. One student talked specifically about how the research notetaking guide had become an integral part of her reading process:

If I had research notes available to me, I would definitely use those to organize the article. If I didn't, I would probably take notes, the first parts in the notes part, and then I would probably do a summary of it. I would follow the same structure, even if I did not have those [guides]. (So, you internalized it) Yeah.

Students shared that learning to identify important points in a reading, writing summaries, as well as learning to write more thoughtful marginal notes, helped them to retain information, and draw connections between concepts so that they could begin to synthesize what they were reading, skills that they used frequently as they worked on their semester-long research projects in ITW and in their courses across the curriculum.

## Strategies and Resources

Finally, in the focus group meetings, students talked about strategies and resources that they learned in the linked course series, and the extent to which they were using these strategies in other courses. As we noted earlier, most students in the

focus groups cited the reading and research notes guides as being especially important to their literacy development in their first year of college, encouraging them to complete their reading, and to work to comprehend and write about what they'd read; as a result of learning how to use the guides, students talked about becoming more engaged in their reading and research overall. One student shared:

Research notes, I really like them just like the outline for research notes, I never really used before. It makes a really big difference as you are reading textbooks for other classes especially if it is something that you are not interested in because it forces you to become interested in it and make it clear for yourself, even if you do not want to. For me personally, I can read an entire page and not even comprehend a single word of it. It just all goes over my head. I don't know why. So for those, it definitely helps me because it makes you put it in your own words and write a summary.

In talking about the integration between reading and writing, other students reported that writing research notes helped them get their thoughts down and organize their ideas while reading. One student talked about the research notetaking guide helping him to synthesize ideas, "I liked the way it was structured, because you also had to organize your thoughts and put it in your own words and paraphrase." Several students talked about being surprised how much they could draw on these notes as they began to draft their researched essays. The framework of the research notes showed students how integrated the processes of reading, writing, and research are; they noted that summarizing and synthesizing their research notes helped them to take stock of what information was missing, to develop a plan for further research, and to begin writing their essays.

Connected to their reading experiences while in college, students found that learning how to differentiate between various kinds of articles and how to use a variety of new reading strategies was beneficial in understanding more complex, scholarly readings in multiple courses. One student shared that learning how to read a textbook and take useful notes in the first-semester course helped her to use these strategies in her sociology course. Wardle (2007), quotes David Guile and Michael Young's point that transfer is "a process of transition between activity systems," such as two courses in different disciplines. In order to transfer learning from one context (or activity system) to another, Guile and Young note that "Learners need to be supported to participate in an activity system that encourages collaboration, discussion, and some form of 'risk taking'" (p. 68). We have worked to create this collaborative environment for students in the *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*, and to talk with students about how they are (or could be) using what they've learned about reading and writing processes in their other courses.

Finally, students talked about how the strategies they learned in the first

semester helped them to become better writers in the second semester ITW course and other courses. For example, one student rediscovered the usefulness of outlining in guiding her writing process:

I just thought the outline was very helpful. In high school, people told me to use outlines and I never did . . . You guys brought the outline back and I thought it was very useful. It made me want to use it. I have a paper due in sociology and I made an outline and it definitely helped.

Several students talked about the importance of learning to read aloud as a strategy that helped them not only to better comprehend their reading but also to improve their writing. In addition to excerpts from course readings, we ask students to read their essay drafts aloud as part of the revision process, and to share their research with the class in a formal presentation. Students noted that this focus on reading aloud and presenting their work gave them confidence to speak up in other classes. This confidence has extended beyond the classroom, as students from each year's linked course experience have presented their research on educational reform at the campus' annual Academic Excellence Conference, and shared their research findings in formal and informal meetings with local educators and community leaders. As first-year education majors, these students realized that their voices matter, and that, in order to engage in conversations about current issues in education, it was important to learn more about the language, issues, values, and genres of their intended field of study. As we've learned from our ongoing work with these students, they have developed a sense of civic responsibility and many students in this initiative have chosen, during their first year in college, to work in broader educational contexts far earlier than their fellow Education majors, giving back to their communities through after-school and head start programs, youth camps, fundraising, and tutoring, among other activities.

## The Future and Implications of the *Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative*

After the first year of implementation, news of the Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative in the Education Department spread across the campus. Tanya and Darrell offered a faculty workshop in May 2013, to share what they had learned about the benefits for both teachers and students involved in a department-based first-year experience in conjunction with the Thinking and Writing program. Katherine, as ITW Coordinator, worked with faculty from departments across campus to create full-year experiences for students interested their majors; an introductory film analysis course for majors linked with an ITW course on Writing About Film has



been a popular addition to the linked course initiative. The Building Excellence in Science and Technology (BEST) Program, a new academically themed living learning community (LLC), also linked a ITW course with a interdisciplinary first-year course the following semester. The aim of this yearlong initiative is for students to apply insights they gain through their ITW research to develop community-based projects focusing on science and technology. Opportunities to extend our research to a broader spectrum of students across the curriculum may provide further evidence of the benefits of a linked course first-year model at KSC and elsewhere.

In the past few years at Keene State College, there has been discussion about creating a first-year seminar program; however, due to budgetary and staffing constraints and administrative turnover, a firm proposal for a first-year seminar has never developed. The Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative has provided an alternative model to the first-year seminar and generated renewed interest among faculty across the curriculum in teaching the ITW 101 course. As higher education institutions across the nation face similar reading and writing challenges with their incoming student populations, and budgetary and staffing constraints precluding the addition of new first-year courses, the idea of a year-long first-year experience drawing on existing courses and resources may be a more viable and desirable option.

The research findings for KSC's Initiative, thus far, indicate that the majority of students have benefitted from the work being done via the first-year linked courses, particularly in terms of their academic success and retention. As retention scholar Vincent Tinto (1998) has shown, integrated first-year academic programs such as linked or clustered learning courses, or, specific to his research, learning communities, can help students to persist in college, giving them a greater sense of belonging to the institution, and encouraging a sense of shared knowledge, learning and responsibility among the cohort of first-year students participating in such programs (p. 7). In advocating for a more integrative approach to first-year instruction, Tinto argues that first-year students also need a stronger connection to full-time faculty as mentors and advisors; as we've seen from our experience, a full-year linked course initiative can facilitate those essential connections. Often, those advocating for retention and student success argue that the goal is to keep all students at the institution, but we would caution that equating student success with retention shouldn't be the main priority.

Part of our responsibility as advisors and mentors during this yearlong experience with first-year students is to help them determine, earlier than their junior year (when such decisions usually occur), whether they are particularly suited to become teachers. By treating our students as pre-service teachers from the beginning and talking with them about their interests and career goals, some students realize that they need to choose a different path—changing their majors or sometimes, choosing to change schools or take time away from college to explore other options. The relationship faculty can build with students through the linked course initiative allows for this type of informal advising. Despite the fact that not all students in

linked courses remain in the major, students tell us that this experience has helped to clarify their path while in college, and that their connections with their first-year cohort and with faculty in the program and the strategies they've gained and used in other courses have made the experience worth doing. The first-year experience has also allowed students who did not bloom the first semester to have another semester to grow, to develop literacy strategies and to talk with their instructors and cohort about what connections they were making in their other college courses.

Chris Anson (2016) has noted that our understanding of “the phenomenon of transfer,” or how transfer works, is still developing, and that there are a number of factors yet to be studied that impact transfer from context to context (p. 519). The structures of full-year linked courses, learning communities, and clustered learning programs connecting two or more courses that typically involve the same faculty and students, offer researchers interested in transfer further opportunities to study how a whole cohort of first-year students apply, transform, integrate and reconstruct their learning about reading and writing processes across contexts, including those that the students have in common within the linked course program (Nowacek 2011; Wardle 2007). Studying FYC courses designed specifically for first-year students in a particular major, taught by faculty in that field, also could offer some insights into whether such a focus has the potential to help students transfer what they've learned about integrating reading and writing processes as they move to new, similar disciplinary contexts, such as other courses in that major, and then, as they generalize or “recontextualize” (Nowacek, 2011) their learning in courses beyond the major.

From our observations working with four cohorts in the Reading, Thinking and Writing Initiative, we have seen students who want to become teachers take on the identity of teacher-learner sooner than students part of the full-year experience. Though we have not yet looked at *how* transfer is occurring across courses, we have heard students talk about how they've drawn on skills and strategies they've learned as they move through the education program, through their second required major, and through the Integrative Studies (general education) program. Sophomores who were part of the linked first-year program have shared in focus groups that in their sophomore-level major courses, they felt more confident in the knowledge they'd already gained about the field during the first year, and found that they had an advantage because they could identify and build upon the language, genres, debates, and research that they had begun to study during their first year. In a future study, we plan to consider how students have transferred and integrated their reading and writing skills as well as their developing knowledge of the field in subsequent Education courses. A wider study of discipline-specific first-year courses or full-year initiatives at institutions of various kinds may have implications for further study in many areas of interest, including retention theory, student success models, teaching for transfer, and, of particular interest to us, teaching reading and writing in and across the disciplines.

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## Appendix A. Textbook Reading Guide

Created by Tanya Sturtz and Darrell Hucks (2012)

### Preview

- What are the title and subtitles?
- What do you think you will be learning in this chapter?

### Main Points & Questions

- What questions do you have about the reading?
- What terms do you need to learn or remember?
- What main points do you want to remember?

### Summary

- Write a brief summary about the chapter.
- Any questions you still have that you should ask a classmate or your professor?

## Appendix B. Research Notes

Created by Tanya Sturtz and Darrell Hucks (2012)

|                                |
|--------------------------------|
| <b>Citation (In APA style)</b> |
|                                |
| <b>Summary</b>                 |
|                                |
| <b>Notes</b>                   |
|                                |
| <b>Reference to Research</b>   |
|                                |