

Abstract

Recent reform efforts in developmental education have led to model-development of college literacy instruction without being informed by institution-specific investigations of whether, how, and to what extent new models align with the literacy rigors of next-level courses across pathways. Such work is essential to informing literacy programming at the college level. This manuscript describes a literacy curriculum audit approach that can be employed by faculty. This approach is a systematized method to determine what it means to be college-text ready based on the literacy demands, practices, and expectations in introductory-level general education and career technical education college courses.

Keywords: curriculum audit, college literacy, alignment, developmental reading, access

Investigating College-Text Readiness:

Literacy Curriculum Audits to Research Practice

In theory, developmental literacy programming in colleges is a mode of access to and retention in higher education. However, across the last decade, scholarship has raised questions about the efficacy of traditional models of developmental education courses (e.g., Bailey & Cho, 2010; Complete College America, 2012; Jaggars & Stacey, 2014; Vandal, 2014), with reading courses being of particular concern in some scholarship. Much of this research focuses on outcomes well beyond coursework (i.e., employing labor market models of analysis), rather than on actual curriculum and instruction issues.

Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, numerous reform models intended to support students' academic success have gained widespread popularity. Nationwide, developmental reading courses are rapidly being transformed from stand-alone courses into accelerated models (e.g., accelerated programming, contextualized instruction, corequisite classes, integrated reading and writing). In this manuscript, we refer to all such models, from traditional stand-alone developmental reading courses to newer reformed models, as "literacy supports."

A major oversight in these scale-up efforts is how reading instruction in college actually aligns with and scaffolds learners toward the reading expectations and rigors of their next-level courses. Indeed, some curricular models have demonstrated some improvement in students succeeding in basic gateway courses that have a traditional weeding-out role. However, it is imperative to understand that these large-scale reforms happening at the postsecondary level have not done away with the issues associated with the range of literacy competencies and dispositions toward reading that new students bring with them to college. What has changed is

the program design employed by institutions in striving to overcome a centuries-old problem. What is not known yet is whether the new models actually prepare the students for the discipline-specific literacy demands of general education programming or for the professional literacy demands of career/technical programming and future workplace needs.

What is needed are more local-level investigations designed to inform curricular improvements and ongoing program evaluation work for existing literacy coursework or other types of literacy supports. Because individuals teaching reading as part of a literacy support are the best situated to be doing this work in coordination with faculty in the introductory-level credit-bearing courses, our call is for practitioner-based, collaborative investigations.

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a literacy curriculum audit approach that can be employed by faculty teams within postsecondary institutions. The term “curriculum audit” is one we have borrowed from English (1988) who noted that “the broadest definition of auditing is simply an objective, external review” (p. 1). For English, and for us, “the power of an audit is that it reflects standard operating procedure rather than something extraordinary in the way of good practice” (p. 3). In other words, the audit being described is intended to investigate the existing practices, expectations, and demands specific to literacy.

The purpose of such an audit, ultimately, is to determine how best to support students’ transitions to and progress with college-level literacy practices and expectations, whether they are pursuing traditional general education programming toward transfer to a university or a career technical education track for certification or two-year degree. We take a stance that an individual has the potential to grow as a reader across the lifespan and regardless of life’s situational context (Alexander, 2005, 2006). Thus, reading instruction should be part and parcel of postsecondary education, and at times it might be remedial, corrective, or developmental in

nature (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Finally, as a caveat, we use reading as the example, but we are fully cognizant that the audit we discuss can equally be employed for other core areas, including composition, speech, and possibly math.

A Literacy Curriculum Audit

The particular audit described in this manuscript was inspired by and builds upon the foundational work on “Reality Checks” (Burrell et al., 1997; Simpson, 1993, 1996), which are “appraisals or descriptive research” undertaken to uncover the types of academic literacy tasks expected of students across subject areas (Burrell et al., 1997, p. 55). According to Simpson (1993), “When we conduct reality checks we venture past our safe classrooms into the world that our students encounter each day when they attend a lecture, read an assigned chapter, study for a test, or write a paper from multiple sources” (p. 36). The specific approach discussed here is based on a decade of research in urban, suburban, and rural community colleges (Author, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020; Greci, 2019). It is a systematized method to determine what it means to be college-text ready based on the literacy demands, practices, and expectations in both general education and career technical introductory-level college courses.

This approach builds upon tenets of action or practitioner research. For one, as we have already noted, those best suited to do this type of investigation are the field professionals—those instructors and learning support personnel who are immersed in this work and in students’ needs daily. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), this is a key tenet of action research: “action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation, such as other educational practitioners in the setting, students, parents, or other members of the community” (p. 3). Peyton-Marsh and Gonzalez (2018) have similarly argued, “As practitioner researchers learn more about their students and themselves, they become

empowered advocates influencing positive changes in pedagogy to engage students in literate practices that are personal and instructional” (p. 469).

Such an audit approach is designed to have an ongoing evaluative component. Specifically, it is designed to ascertain whether and how the reading expectations and goals within the existing literacy support (again, this includes traditional developmental reading or newer reform models for literacy instruction) prepare students for the textual demands and instructor expectations encountered in introductory-level general education (GE) and career technical education (CTE) courses. In addition, it promotes the inclusion of reading instruction informed by an awareness of the disciplinary literacy (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) or professional literacy in each field of study through a vertical, hierarchical model of scaffolded complexity. The audit approach presented here focuses on evaluative questions leading to information that can promote greater alignment of courses and serve as the basis for expert-driven curricular and/or instructional reform:

1a. What are the text-expectations, including text types, tasks, and goals?

- In literacy supports (e.g., freestanding traditional developmental reading courses, corequisite or adjunct courses, integrated reading and writing courses, college success seminars, composition courses)?
- In introductory general education (GE) courses (e.g., history, biology, psychology, sociology)?
- In introductory career technical education (CTE) courses (e.g., welding, HVAC, nursing, criminal justice, horticulture)?

1b. How do these text-expectations align between target course offerings (literacy supports and introductory GE/CTE courses)?

2. What constitutes college-level text-readiness for entry into introductory GE/CTE courses from the literacy supports at this institution?

These questions allow for a focused investigation of the faculty's tacit expectations for students' text-readiness, defined as the competencies and attitudes necessary for mastery of respective courses' student learning objectives (SLOs). Especially in the current climate of higher education reform, there is a widespread assumption that 'college-ready' for reading is a monolithic measurable construct. In reality, however, this construct is variable, complex, and fundamentally tacit. From our perspective, the only meaningful way to design appropriate literacy instruction is to back map from the specific literacy demands of the next level. Thus, the goal for this audit, ultimately, is to determine whether there is alignment in the literacy expectations across the focal areas. Once alignment—or misalignment—is determined, only then can purposeful scaffolding of instruction be designed.

Finally, it should be noted that the questions posed are focused on understanding the *literacy* practices and expectations across the literacy supports and introductory-level college courses. However, opportunities for reality checks of other content with a focus on hierarchically sequenced courses (majors or pathways) are certainly possible, if not desired (e.g., History 101 to History 201).

Data Collection and Analysis

As several reports exist that detail research undertaken with this particular audit approach, this manuscript is intended not as a report of data collected, but rather as a description of the audit approach for use by college faculty on their own campuses.

To begin, those undertaking the audit process must determine which courses, programs, disciplines, or professional areas have the appropriate sequential relationship and which sequences or linkages would benefit from the audit process. Admittedly, schools that have adopted a pathways model will have an easier time of undertaking a vertically oriented audit (Author, 2020). The same likely holds true for more narrowly focused CTE programming leading to certification or badges. Identifying target courses is more effective when the rationale and decisions in identifying a focus are made within the spirit of cross-unit academic partnership and comradery, perhaps as part of a quality enhancement accreditation project. The audit activity should not be one-sided in design, although individuals from a single unit or from beyond the identified units (e.g., instructional support office) can undertake the actual workload.

It is important to differentiate initiatives that focus on content alignment between courses or institutions and our focus on the much broader construct of literacy-competency alignment. With a focus on reading competencies and attitudes, rationales for examining course alignments might be proposed for target academic pathways (particularly those that are newly part of reform efforts and have yet to undergo rigorous summative evaluation activities from a pedagogical perspective). Similarly, specifically targeted course offerings may be selected: college-level courses that are identified as reading-intensive; high-DFW courses (courses in which a higher-than-usual percentage of final grades is a D, an F, or a W); or courses within a program with labor market projections of increased future need, particularly when high-level reading is required (or when workforce organizations in the local area have identified the course). Alternatively, such an approach may be appropriate when students in identified majors are having trouble passing reading tests or other so-called “basic skills” tests for certifications and licenses.

The audit approach requires posing the three guiding evaluative questions as are presented in Figure 1 along with the data sources to be reviewed in seeking an answer to each audit query.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The audit involves parallel data-collection protocols for investigating the literacy expectations in each hierarchically (vertically) delivered sequence (i.e., literacy supports including learning-to-learn courses followed the next semester by a target GE or CTE course) or horizontally linked courses (i.e., a corequisite or adjunct literacy-support course linked to a composition course taken concurrently with a target GE or CTE course).

Artifacts

For each protocol, all artifacts should first be gathered from representative courses (e.g., course texts, syllabi, supplemental texts including those that are digitally based). Depending on the institutional expertise and resources available, for course texts analyses might include basic readability indices (Wood, 1997), Lexile analyses (Williamson, 2008; Wright & Stone, 2004), and qualitative measures such as a genre analysis (see a similar approach in Heinrichs & LaBranche, 1986), Friendly Text Evaluations (Dreher & Singer, 1989; Singer, 1992), and other informal measures (Schumm, Haager, & Leavell, 1991). Using the same measures across all text types for each sequenced course is key in order to examine side-by-side alignment of text-complexity expectations between the literacy support and CTE or GE courses.

Observations

As the next source of audit data, targeted class sessions and labs when appropriate should be observed by a literacy specialist to gather data on in-class text usage, textbook-reading strategy instruction, and discipline-specific literacy instruction with multiple observations across

a semester serving as a gold standard. Of course, an observation instrument that reflects local needs would need to be developed, such as that found in Appendix A. Should there be multiple sections of the target class being offered and taught by different instructors, it is preferable to have observations that cross these sections. It is also important to observe classes across the semester or term to get a sense of changes in expectations.

Observations are crucial for an alignment audit because required course texts across course sections may be different. Perhaps equally important, different texts are used in vastly different ways and for very different purposes across contexts. One notable finding from previous audits, for instance, was that traditional developmental reading text usages within classroom contexts had more in common with traditional general education/liberal arts traditions than with the application-oriented purposes of CTE contexts (Author, et al., 2019, 2020). Such observations allow for additional detail in the purpose for any texts, as well as additional text types that are incorporated beyond the official course textbooks (e.g., PowerPoints, lecture notes, websites)—what NCEE (2013) refers to as “workarounds.” More importantly, comparison of field notes from these observations allows for noting differences in text purpose and utilization across the literacy supports and the target CTE or GE courses.

Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups focusing on the guiding questions should be conducted to gain insights from the faculty involved in teaching the identified courses, but just as valuable are the perceptions of other members of each academic unit. This can be done strategically through the combined use of surveys and focus groups/interviews.

Discussions are most fruitful when the focus group is comprised of faculty with similar roles. For instance, it makes sense to organize focus groups of faculty from similar areas (e.g.,

health science faculty together, economics faculty together) and faculty with similar ranks or roles (e.g., part-time faculty together, full-time faculty together). In order to obtain the information needed to determine the factors impinging upon relational alignment, the audit-focused questions for surveys and focus groups should emphasize questions that get at expectations specific to a particular course, as opposed to general notions of text-readiness (see Appendix B for a sample focus group protocol). This is particularly important because the context of each course presents rather unique textual expectations, and it might be suggested that each class section is as different as is it similar to others offered the same semester. Furthermore, faculty may be teaching students at different levels along the academic pathway. Indeed, some faculty in composition (as well as mathematics for that matter) may be concurrently teaching a developmental-level (co-requisite or freestanding) and a credit-bearing college-level course. Each context likely requires different levels of reading competency, attitudes about reading, and degrees of prior knowledge.

Student Voices

An important component of such an audit is to include the often-forgotten voices of students. Through the same data sources as incorporated for faculty and staff participants (online surveys, interviews, and focus groups), data can be gathered on student perceptions of institutional literacy expectations, college-text-readiness needs, perceived preparation from concurrent or prior literacy supports or other supports including secondary school, and specific gaps felt in their own literacy transitions (see Appendix C for a sample student focus group protocol). Student voices should include both those within the sequence and those who have completed the courses being audited.

Figure 2 presents a visual display of the overlapping audit process as it draws upon the voices of the faculty and the voices of the students.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Benefits and Challenges

This literacy curriculum audit model is a significant time commitment if done well. Although there is no single timeline for such an audit, as it may be truncated or extended to serve the local needs, we have had success with data collection over the course of a full semester. Such an in-depth exploration is certainly not without its challenges. However, there are a number of benefits that can justify this investment of time and resources. In the next section, we first explore potential benefits before offering insights about likely challenges.

Benefits

From our perspective, the largest potential benefit of undertaking this type of audit approach is to uncover an institutional definition(s) of college-ready for reading. Prior usage of this approach suggests that text expectations and discipline-specific literacy practices are clearly not aligned and are also not articulated to students completely or consistently (Author, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020). Thus, working toward context-specific definitions of college-text-ready is critical for a number of reasons, both for clarifying expectations for students and also for allowing faculty an opportunity to determine shared text-expectations.

With such an understanding faculty should be able to draw upon the theories and practices situated in disciplinary literacy or professional literacy to integrate developmental literacy practices into their classes (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In addition, such information could be shared with feeder high schools so that they can better prepare students for

the transition to local postsecondary institutions through the standard curriculum or with locally designed transition courses.

Findings from such an audit can also inform how text complexity levels might best be expanded across the varied literacy supports from beginning of semester to the end of the semester in order to purposefully scaffold students toward preparedness for entry into GE or CTE courses. This would not only serve toward remedying the problems with alignment, consistency of expectations, and communication should they be found, but would also allow students a better understanding of the purpose and goals of postsecondary reading into and across their careers.

Once the research questions pertaining to the college text demands and whether the students are college-text-ready have been answered, a logical next step in employing a cyclical action research model might be the adaption of the Languages of the Disciplines research model with its language study groups (Author, 1982; Sartain, 1981) to discern the receptive literacy/academic problems that students regularly encounter in target classes.

Challenges

The challenges faced in undertaking such a project are many; however, with planning and collaboration these are not insurmountable as is seen through Greci's (2019) endeavors at the University of Alaska. First, obtaining faculty buy-in for the audit process is key. Although it is not necessary to have every faculty member on board from each of the units involved, there must be enough members to be of influence. As well, the data pool ought to be rich in order to serve the evaluative functions of the audit, as well as to fully inform any curricular or instructional revamping to result from the audit.

Secondly, as noted previously, a major goal of this work is to inform alignment and scaffolding of the reading expectations and rigors across course levels. Thus, the actual choosing of the courses may simply rest on established course sequences (introductory-level, intermediate, and advanced courses). But without the cooperation of the faculty teaching across such sequences, the audit project falls flat. Such participation will rest upon the administrative team at one level or another providing faculty release time (or some other type of incentive) to undertake the audit, undertake the analysis of the data, and develop and disseminate an audit report. Perhaps this support can come from instructional improvement grants or with release time associated with upcoming accreditation visits. Support should also be requested from the Office of Institutional Research whether it be as fiscal resources or personnel (including work study students). Of course, another option is to consider a version of the audit procedure for the methodology providing the foundation for an action research-oriented thesis or dissertation or a sabbatical project. If findings indicate that curricula or instructional reforms are necessary, then faculty members who implement these reforms should be granted appropriate rewards (financial, course release, etc.). Resources in support of the process are more than likely to be required, although these may be rather minor but still fundamental to the process (e.g., audio recorders for focus groups, access to an online program for electronic survey development and distribution, monetary incentives for faculty/staff participants, pizza for students in focus groups).

Finally, classes need to be visited for observational data to be collected and interviews to be undertaken. There will be faculty who do not desire such observations to be undertaken in their classes as they fear that the true reason for the audit observation is as part of a personnel process. It is imperative that the team be very clear that the purpose for observations is to gather

information on text usage, not to investigate or evaluate teaching. Additionally, the unit administrator must affirm that any information collected is kept confidential by the audit team.

Audit Deliverables

This type of audit has the potential to provide an enormous amount of information toward answering the types of questions noted earlier in this manuscript. Although our aim is not to provide a report of findings, a general sense of the type of information yielded—and the insights offered—may be useful in order to anticipate deliverables.

First, through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, much information can be gleaned about faculty expectations for students' reading experiences and competencies. In our experience, faculty identified a range of student literacy strengths and weaknesses. In several cases, faculty expressed an assumption that students should be able to read the assigned textbooks independently upon entry to their courses. In other cases, faculty held more overtly deficit assumptions about what students could not do upon entry.

Second, through analysis of artifacts as well as class observations, we were able to see firsthand the wide range of texts assigned: from workbooks to middle school-appropriate novels in developmental reading classes and primary sources to field-specific textbooks in content-area classes. Through this exploration, we were able to compare the complexity of these various texts and the disparity between literacy courses and target content-area classes. Thus, we were able to determine where there were opportunities for intentional scaffolding might be appropriate.

Similarly, we were able to better understand the purposes and tasks associated with assigned texts and found these to be just as wide ranging as the texts themselves. For instance, we found that for some developmental courses, text-associated tasks appeared to serve goals of skill-development, including comprehension check-ins and vocabulary-development. In other

situations, particularly content-area classes, text-associated tasks were far more focused on content: quizzes and tests, text-supported essays, and hands-on lab work.

The combination of these examples as well as any other insights gained through the audit process can allow for the identification of any gaps in literacy competencies required for student success in courses students will enroll in for future semesters. Such data provides the fundamental information necessary for the discussions between faculty so as to plan for the purposeful scaffolding of instruction thus preparing students for future academic demands and thus alleviating existing competency gaps.

Conclusion

Academic literacy support courses (including developmental reading courses) and programs have been an integral part of higher education since the middle 1800s (Author, 2009, 2018). Despite current reform efforts that aim for accelerating students through or around traditional course-based supports, there is no decline in learner needs for literacy support at the postsecondary level. Thus, we are likely to have some form of literacy supports on the college reading and learning front well into the future (Boylan, 2003). One way we can move ahead to improve this programming and advocate for students' actual literacy needs is by continuing vertically focused as well as horizontally structured alignment work that is being initiated elsewhere in the educational system. There is urgency to undertake such audits now during the period of rapid reform in higher education so that reform-oriented curriculum and instructional approaches do not simply get locked in place as has been the case in the past. Establishing a comprehensive postsecondary reading agenda, especially one that shifts the focus from "remediation" to authentic preparation for postsecondary success (and beyond), begins with

having a conception of college reading readiness at the local institutional level. The audit approach presented in this manuscript can provide insights to inform such a conception.

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Appendix A: Text Usage Classroom Observation Checklist

Course:

Time/Day/Observation #:

Text(s):

Instructor Text Usage/References	Yes	No	Frequency	Notes
Instructor's copy of the course text(s) is in within view				
Multiple texts are incorporated				
The primary 'text' is of what type?				
Course text(s) is directly referenced				
A course reading assignment is provided during the class session				
Text organization/structure is mentioned				
A strategy for reading/studying the course text(s) is mentioned, explained, or modeled				
Class homework appears to be text-based or text-driven				
Discussion of how to read like a _____ is observed				
Other				

Appendix B: Faculty Focus Group

Demographic questions

1. What is your primary affiliation on your campus?

General questions for discussion, with follow-up questions generated as needed.

1. What do you expect students to be able to do with text(s) at the outset of your course/program?
2. What do you expect students to be able to do with text(s) at the conclusion of your course/program?
3. How would you, if you were a student in your course/program, approach the required reading?
4. What are some of the reading strengths that you notice with students in your course/program?
5. What are some of the reading challenges that you notice with students in your course/program?
6. What are students' attitudes toward reading at the outset of your course/program?
7. What are students' attitudes toward reading at the conclusion of your course/program?
8. What do students need to *do* with the information they learn from required text(s) in your course/program?
9. How do you assess students' comprehension of the text material required in your course/program?
10. Currently, there is a major focus on college-readiness. In what ways does your institution convey to you what constitutes a student being college-ready for reading at your institution?

- a. Do you know the criteria or measures? What are they?
- 11. In your field/discipline/area, what does it mean to be career-ready for reading?
- 12. How do you prepare students to read texts in their next-level courses in your program/area?
- 13. In what ways do you discuss the reading demands/expectations of a professional in your field?
- 14. In what ways do you discuss with students how a person in your field might use text?
- 15. Based on what you know about this study and our focus, do you have anything else to share? Anything else you think we should know? Any recommendations for others we should speak with?

FOR CTE FACULTY ONLY:

- 16. What do you know about the developmental reading courses at your institution?
 - a. How effective do you think the current developmental reading curricula are in preparing students for career technical education courses?
 - b. If you could make any recommendations to the people who teach the reading courses, is there anything you'd want to say?

Appendix C: Student Focus Group

Informal focus groups (approximately 45-60 minutes)

****General questions for discussion, with follow-up questions generated as needed.**

1. What is your current or intended program area or major?
 - a. What year are you?
 - b. How many credit hours have you successfully completed here or at another college?
2. Before you enrolled in courses at this college, what did you think the expectations would be as far as reading in college CTE courses?
3. How much reading is required in your CTE courses?
 - a. How does this compare with what you expected?
4. What types of reading/what kinds of texts are you reading in CTE courses?
 - a. How does this compare with what you expected?
5. What are you expected to do with the information you read?
 - a. How does this compare with what you expected?
6. How does the reading required in your CTE courses compare with what you did in high school?
7. How does the reading required in your CTE courses compare with what you do in your general education courses?
8. How much of the required reading in your CTE courses do you actually do?
 - a. Why?
9. Do your CTE instructors ever discuss how people read in different fields?
 - a. Can you provide example of this?

10. How well did your high school work prepare you for the CTE courses you are in right now?
11. How well did your developmental reading courses prepare you for the CTE courses you are in right now?
12. If you could make any recommendations about the developmental reading courses about preparing students for CTE courses, what would they be? Why?