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**Original Sin and Redemption**

**Developmental Education in the 21st Century**

In higher education, we do lots of important work: we produce astronauts and accountants, dancers and doctors. But, if your focus is on economic equity, on the American Dream, on creating a more just society—the work we do in developmental education is the most important work being done in higher education, which makes the following description of developmental education extremely odd:

In higher education, the most marginalized students are taught by the most marginalized faculty in the most underfunded institutions.

Most developmental students are taught by adjunct faculty who have no preparation to teach them and, in too many cases, are doing so with only a baccalaureate degree.

How can this be?

Let’s start with original sin.

In the second half of the 20th century, developmental education climbed to an elevated position in the pantheon of higher education. Universities were bragging about their diversity. Demigods like Bartholomae, Lunsford, Rose, Bleich, Boylan, and many more were launching thunderbolts of articles and books about developmental reading, writing and math. In 1981, the small and mostly midwestern National Association for Remedial/ Developmental Studies in Postsecondary Education—NAR/DSPE—evolved into NADE and elected its first president, Hunter Boylan. In 1968, CRLA, the College Reading and Learning Association, burst on the scene. AMATYC, growing by leaps and bounds in the 70s and 80s, began publishing *The AMATYC Review* in 1979. Sessions on basic writing proliferated at CCCC, frequently drawing crowds that spilled over into the hallways. Leaders from basic writing were frequently elected chairs of CCCC. The late 20th century was a time when much attention was coming to focus on developmental education.

In this version of the Garden of Eden, however, it is possible to nominate several people for the role of Lucifer. Perhaps most qualified for this role was a journalist named James Traub whose book about City College in the CUNY system, *City on a Hill,* convinced many that open admissions and developmental education had no hope of succeeding, that those high risk students were not worth the risk. His conclusions were embraced by Mayor Giuliani and the CUNY Board of Trustees so that in 1999, the gates of the CUNY universities slammed shut for students who needed developmental coursework. Students needing developmental courses were re-directed to the community colleges.

And this trend spread like a stock market panic across the country. The University of Cincinnati closed down its University College, the University of Minnesota shuttered its respected General College, and the California State University system declared that students would have only one year to complete their developmental courses. Within a decade, in most parts of the country, legislative fiats or the raising of admissions standards by the universities themselves meant that students needing developmental courses could find them only at the local community college. And because it has had such long-lasting negative effects, I like to think of this decision as the “original sin.”

And despite James Traub’s critical role, there has always been an broad undercurrent in American society who would like to return to a more elitist system under which only qualified students are admitted to college. As

It’s never been clear to me why this decision was made. Sometimes it is suggested that the motive was to save money. Others have said that in some existential way, developmental students simply don’t “belong” in the university. Whatever the motivation, I’ve never heard it argued that this change would be better for students.

In fact, these decisions have been harmful in a number of ways.

First, let’s look at the harmful effects on developmental students themselves. We know that many developmental students arrive in college with severe doubts about whether they are “college material.” Most of us who teach developmental students have heard this over and over from our students. If these students attempt to enroll in a university, are assessed, and are told they cannot enroll at the university but must first attend a community college, we have simply reinforced their doubts about whether they belong in college, undercutting their confidence and increasing the likelihood they will give up and drop out.

Even when they are successful at a community college, we have also added the obstacle of transfer to their path. Successful transfer is difficult enough for students with the social capital to understand how to navigate the process, but for many developmental students who are first generation to attend college and who have no one with college experience to help them, the process of successful transfer is simply too difficult.

Second, restricting dev ed to the community colleges has exaggerated an already heirarchical higher ed structure. We’ve reinforced the pernicious idea that community colleges are for weak students; strong students go to universities. Unfortunately, I think it is too late to reverse this unfortunate decision (sin?), but I do have a modest proposal that would reverse the stigmatization of community colleges it has re-inforced. Instead of sending developmental courses and students to community colleges, why not send all students to community colleges for their first two years. This change would eliminate the stereotyped attitude that good students don’t go to community colleges and, at the same time, would greatly reduce the cost of going to college, at least for the first two years. Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be a “snowball’s chance in hell” that my proposal will be enacted, so for the remainder of this talk, I will be looking at how we can best respond to this “fallen” world.

Returning to my list of the harmful effects of the original sin that sent most developmental students to community colleges. We com cols depend on the universities to educate graduate students to teach for us. Because at most universities, students needing developmental course work are not admitted, graduate students can complete their entire program without ever having encountered a developmental student or a graduate faculty member who has ever taught developmental students. In most graduate programs, there is no course in the teaching of developmental math, English, or reading. Even at those schools that offer a graduate degree in rhetoric and composition, if there is a course dealing with basic writing, it is usually a course tracing the history and exploring the theory of basic writing, not a course in how to teach it.

As a result, most new faculty arrive at community colleges with no preparation to teach our most important and most challenging courses—developmental reading, writing, and math.

Even the accrediting agencies play a role in this unfortunate situation. Accrediting agencies in many parts of the country have decided that, while at least a master’s degree is required to teach college-level courses, faculty with just a bachelor’s degree can teach developmental courses. What are they thinking of? We know that teaching developmental courses is both important and difficult, and yet the accrediting agencies allow the least prepared faculty to teach them.

And those of us at community colleges also play a part in this sad pattern. Too often our most experienced faculty teach upper-level courses, while developmental courses are staffed by adjunct faculty. I have to ask: what are we thinking of?

This entire situation is disturbing. The teaching of the most important courses we offer in higher education is done, too often, by the least qualified teachers, teachers who have little of no preparation to teach developmental courses, who must commute among several schools, who receive little support for research or scholarship, who are not supported to attend professional conferences, and who often have very little job security.

Disturbing, yes. But in my title I promised “redemption,” so here it comes.

Despite the lack of graduate preparation, despite the heavy teaching loads, despite the lack of support, those of us working in developmental education are bringing about a revolution. Despite the discouraging conditions of our employment, for the past ten years, we have been involved in the largest restructuring and re-thinking of the discipline in at least half a century.

Just last week I visited Tulsa Community College in Oklahoma and the week before that, Jackson Community College in Mississippi. At these schools, I met with faculty struggling under teaching loads of fifteen credits with classes, in many cases, larger than 25. They were feeling the effects of budget cuts of 20% over the last few years. Few of them received any released time for the many tasks they were taking on, and yet I was amazed to find both schools to be alive with innovation. Math faculty were wrestling with developing multiple paths to multiple college-level math courses. Reading faculty were spending hours adding the teaching of writing to their repertoire. English faculty were learning how to help students grow as readers and were trying to figure out how to scale up the ALP classes they had been piloting for several years. On top of these tasks, The Tulsa faculty were trying to figure out an equitable approach to assessment and placement. At Jackson they were beginning work on guided pathways. And these dedicated faculty at Jackson and Tulsa are not unusual.

Throughout the country, faculty are realigning their math programs with students’ goals, reading and writing are being integrated, multiple layers of remediation are being reduced, assessment techniques are undergoing convulsive change, classroom pedagogy is being completely re-thought, we are all trying to figure out more effective ways to address non-cognitive issues, and the structure of our developmental programs is being radically redesigned.

All of this is being accomplished, by faculty who have had little preparation, who teach heavy loads, and who receive little support for research or scholarship. This is surely redemptive behavior. Despite the original sin, I would argue that a place in heaven is surely reserved for today’s teachers of developmental education.

So much is being done . . . has been done. I would like to spend the time remaining to sketch out what I think our next steps should be, to identify important tasks that remain to be addressed, and to suggest that, if we want it done right, we faculty will need to be the ones doing it.

For starters, I think the time has passed for faculty to resist any change, to assert that the traditional model of developmental education works just fine. We now know better. And we know some things that work, that will improve the percentage of our students who are successful from something like 1 out of 3 to 3 out 4. Here’s what we know works:

1. corequisite models of developmental education in which students are placed in credit level courses and then are given added support to help them succeed. ALP is one of the most robust corequisite models, but others have shown success as well.
2. we know that multiple paths to credit math will result in success for more students. despite out traditional beliefs, everyone doesn’t need algebra. A developmental math program that prepares some students for credit-level statistics and others for a credit-level quantitative reasoning course will result any many more successful students.
3. We know that separating reading and writing into two different courses was never a good idea and that students will become stronger readers and writers if the take a course that works on both skills.
4. We know that the major reason developmental students don’t succeed is not because they cannot factor a polynomial, draw an inference from a text, or provide evidence to support their assertions in writing. The major reason developmental students don’t succeed is because they give up. We know that we can help with this. We can remove the parts of our programs that reinforce students’ doubts about belonging. We can help them overcome the challenges their lives present. And every one of us, along with counselors and our colleagues who teach student success courses, can help students stay in school.
5. We know that making these changes on a small scale, running a few pilot sections, does not solve the problem. Here at CCBC, the home of ALP, which has had tremendous support over the years from both the faculty and the administration, it still took 8 years before more than 50% of our developmental writers were taking ALP . . . 8 years. And it took 10 years before we were able to scale up to 100%. We have recently calculated how many students who did not succeed in passing ENG 101 would have if we had scaled up to 100% in our third year instead of our tenth: over 3500 students, enough to fill 26 Boeing 737s. We know that it is too costly for students to continue to offer only small pilots years have we have demonstrated their effectiveness.

So that’s what we know works and what we should implement as soon as we possibly can. But there remain other parts of developmental education that we have not yet solved, areas where we don’t know the answer. I am arguing that those of us who are professionals, who have actually taught these courses and worked with these students, need to take the lead on these issues and not wait until some legislature or some board of regents or some system chancellor makes the decisions for us. So here are my three issues we need to go to work on next:

1. Assessment. I was very excited when I heard that CCRC was going to publish a study proposing that we use multiple measures to place students. A few months later, I was dismayed to learn that CCRC’s idea of multiple measures was 2. They are recommending we continue to use discredited Accuplacer-like tests and add to them high school GPA. This does not seem to me to be the final word on assessment, especially when you consider that at many community colleges, the average student has been out of high school ten years or more.  
     
   I recommend that we look at something like the multiple measures developed at University of Wisconsin-Marathon by Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird-Giordano.
   1. standardized test scores in reading and writing
   2. written essay assessing their readiness for a challenging English course
   3. essay is also evaluated as writing
   4. high school transcript of English courses
   5. high school overall GPA
   6. a survey of how prepared they feel they are

Another promising model has been developed by Heidi Estrom at Boise State and is called The Write Class. This computer-based approach takes a student less than half an hour to complete. The Write Course assembles standardized test score, high school gpa, and responses to a thoughtful self-assessment with questions like how many hours a week will you be working, how much reading and writing have you done in the last year, and are you a caregiver for anyone. In addition, the program provides students with examples of the reading and writing requirements in different writing courses and asks students to assess how confident they feel about those requirements.

Whatcom Com Col in Washington State has developed a straightforward score card on which students simply check boxes to indicate which of 9 different criteria they meet, criteria that place them into credit English.

1. The most disadvantaged students  
     
   This is the group we have done the least to address. In programs like our traditional one at CCBC, only about 13% of students placed in a course two levels below credit English ever pass English 101. How can we improve that percentage is a question crying out for our attention.   
     
   Colorado’s Soft Landing Program and CCBC’s Academic Literacy 052 are far from perfect, but are among the earliest attempts to improve the experience of these students.  
     
   In the meantime, there is some evidence, not yet conclusive, that we will increase the percentage of these students who succeed through the credit-level English course if we simply let them enroll in robust corequisite courses. Until we have developed a better approach, this may be the best short-term alternative . . . surely some of us could be trying it and assessing the results.
2. Faculty development

I would argue that this is our most pressing need. We have made considerable progress in changing the structure of developmental education is promising ways, but little work has been done on the most crucial component: improvements to what we do in the classroom. And since the redesigns we’ve been talking about have made major changes in what the classrooms are like and since, as we discussed earlier, graduate schools do little to prepare faculty to teach in these classrooms, a renewed emphasis on fac dev is badly needed.  
  
What we need is good, solid discipline-based fac dev—not more workshops on addressing learning disabilities or avoiding sexual harassment or how to use technology. We need to work on how to teach developmental reading, writing, and math.  
  
The basic problem is resources. We need funding, not a lot, but enough to compensate faculty for attending serious fac dev. One source is Title 3 grant or TAAACT grant. If there is funding, then a robust program like our ALP Fac Dev Institute is possible. We’ve been working for 6 or 7 years here at CCBC to give our faculty the best set of suggestions we can for how to meet the needs of our developmental students in the context of ALP.  
  
What we’ve come up with, thus far, is a faculty development institute consisting of about 25 hours in one week. We have offered these five times in the past few years during January and August when classes are not in session for about 20 faculty each time. Full- and part-time faculty who participate receive a stipend of about $675 for their effort.

The institute is offered as a sort of smorgasbord of ideas. We don’t expect faculty to adopt all the ideas they are presented with, but to select those that they feel most comfortable with and that they think will most benefit their students.

* 1. backwards curriculum design
  2. active learning
  3. integrated reading and writing
  4. non-cogs
  5. thinking skills
  6. editing skills
  7. coordinated syllabi
  8. writing projects instead of single paper assignments

We know that funding for this elaborate a fac dev program is not available at every school, but there are other ways to offer fac dev:

1. mentors
2. informal meetings
3. tie in to new faculty learning communities
4. a series of half day workshops

To sum up, the work we do is extremely important to our students, to our society. Despite the fact that universities have turned dev students away, that our graduate preparation has neglected dev ed, our accrediting agencies believe that developmental course can be taught by our least-prepared faculty, and despite our already heavy teaching and service loads . . . despite all that, we have made remarkable progress in the last ten years. These redesigns of dev ed are paying off for thousands of students. What we have already accomplished is miraculous. But there is so much more to do.

We need to scale up what we know works so many more students benefit, and, I have suggested, we need to address three additional areas: assessment, the most disadvantaged students, and faculty development. Remember that, according to the tradition, when we were tossed out of the Garden of Eden, the price we paid was to have to work “by the sweat of our brow.” Let’s get to work.