

Understanding the Impact of Developmental Literacy Coursework: A Student's Journey through Developmental Learning

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Abstract

The following paper describes one student's journey through developmental programs, designed for students in high school and those who have dropped out, with a focus on literacy development. It includes the student's personal feelings of developmental education and what it means to him to be considered a developmental student. This paper will include a brief life/educational history of the student, his experiences with reading and writing, and final reflections from both the student and me. This paper follows a poetic/arts-based inquiry methodology. It will include different forms of poetry that help express the student's feelings and understandings of taking developmental courses, and being labeled a developmental learner, which have evolved from my interviews with the student. The poems were also inspired by my own understanding and research on developmental learning, policies and programs. This manuscript is meant to shed light on the more personal or human side of developmental literacy programs. The focus is on one student's personal thoughts and experiences of his developmental learning journey. (The student's name used in this paper is a pseudonym. It was changed for confidentiality reasons.)

Keywords: developmental literacy, development learning, developmental programs, literacy programs, General Education Development (GED)

"These [developmental] students, more than any others, need activities that bring the invisible process of comprehending to the visible level" Kylee Beers *When Kids Can't Read*

Developmental Learner

Building

 Creating

 Innovating

 Growing

 Learning

But how do you develop if you always...

Anticipate Being Wrong

Lack Motivation and Engagement

Depend on Others for Knowledge

What do you do?

How can you help?

You want them to be

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Engaged
Independent
Confident
Successful Learner

How do you reach them?

When I hear the word *developmental*, I cannot help but think of continuing, building, and growing. However, when I asked a student what he thought of developmental literacy, he expressed feelings of negativity. Instead of feeling something positive, he felt labeled and unknowledgeable. He felt that learning was impossible because he could not understand all of the material or see how it relates to his real-world. He also felt invisible in the classroom because no one took the time to reach out to him or show they cared about his success. For this student, being placed in and even taking a part of a developmental course made him feel less worthy than his peers. At the end of the year, being enrolled in a developmental course made him feel as if he did not belong.

1. History

Who am I?

Rudy

Political, Helpful, Old-Soul

Son to supportive parents, brother to two sisters who never give up

Ashes my 19-year-old cat, free speech and ideas

Embarrassment, Loneliness

Being left behind and forgotten,

Courage to dropout

Want to experience accomplishments of my dreams

Somewhere

Who is he?

Rudy

Kind-Hearted, Soft Spoken, Courageous

Son, Brother and Loving Uncle

Free speech, Questions, Words and a very Dear Cat

Awe at being an Uncle, Courage to say "Enough is enough it is my life" and Respect for the World

Doubt of being wrong, Being laughed at, Being left behind

Dropping out of High School, Believing in Himself Again, Finding a New Path to Success

Hope for his Future Career and REAL Friendship filled with Honesty

Home

1.1 The Life and Journey of Rudy

Rudy is 19 years old and comes from a small family. Rudy has two older sisters in their 30s, both of whom went to college and successfully obtained their Bachelor of Arts/Science degrees. One sister did start a graduate degree program. Rudy's parents did attend one to two years of college, but neither completed their program. Rudy's mother had previously worked in the education field as a pre-school teacher, and his father is working in retail. He is an uncle to twins, whom he watches for his sister. He has a cat and enjoys playing games (card games, board games, and video games) and reading about history. When asked what he would like to do when he grows up, he said, "Videogame developer but really focusing on the story development and music. The stories in the games are amazing that's why I play them" (personal communication, July 25, 2015).

Rudy is a high school dropout. He attended two years of high school, and when asked why he dropped out, he said he was depressed. Rudy felt angry and mad most of the time because he was not learning and increasingly felt like he did not belong, especially when separated from the rest of the class during what he called "extra help" time (personal communications, July 25, 2015).

Rudy did attempt coursework for an online high school for one year, but it was not a very successful experience. From what Rudy mentioned in his interview, I was able to determine that he was unsuccessful because he was not receiving the developmental help he needed to truly understand all of the material. Online learning requires a student to be independent and self-directed. Rudy struggles with both of these qualities.

Rudy mentioned that he had a great elementary experience but started to fall behind in middle school. When he went into high school he was behind in most of his classes and needed developmental help. That was his first, real encounter with developmental programs. Rudy loved reading but never really connected to anything he read in school. He could never see the point in the readings because he could not see himself or find a way to apply the information to his real world. This detachment chipped away at his motivation and engagement in both the traditional and online high schools. His lack of enthusiasm and focus were symptoms of his need for help in comprehending the assignments and materials, especially in science.

After talking with Rudy, I was convinced that if he had more training in before-, during-, and after-reading strategies he would be able to comprehend more information. It was evident that he had not received enough of best practices reading instruction and had not been given any strategies to develop his ability to comprehend a text, especially a text that would carry him beyond a basic understanding. As Beers (2003) mentioned in *When Kids Can't Read*, we need to "bring the invisible process of comprehending to the visible level." (p. 175).

At the time of the study, Rudy had been working on completing his General Education Diploma (GED) and was enrolled in developmental literacy programs offered by the city that were designed to help students like Rudy achieve their goals. He had completed exams in all of the academic areas except mathematics. He was hoping to enroll at the local community college in either the fall semester of 2015 or the following spring semester. He confided in me, I made the right choice in dropping out. I wasn't happy, and they made me feel like [awful] about myself. My family...my mom...they were able to help me realize that...there are other ways. I didn't have to be unhappy. I didn't have to follow society's ideas of finishing high school. I just want to be me, and I want it to be okay (personal communication, July 25, 2015).

1.2 Being Admissions and College Ready

During my interview with Rudy, we did discuss his plans for college. He mentioned that one of his sisters helped him reach out to the nearby community college in order to gather registration information. She knew that he wanted to attend college and earn a degree, but Rudy still grappled with the fear of failure. He did finally meet with an advisor at the local community college, who explain the services of two different programs that could possibly lead to success. The advisor explained that the first program, the Institutional Developmental Education Plan, essentially helps students, who are not college-level ready, with reading, writing, and mathematics. Their mission was to "add educational value to each individual and prepare students for successful completion of college-level work and the attainment of a degree or certificate" (South Plains College Institutional Developmental Education Plan, 2014). The other program the advisor mentioned is the Success through Academic Resources (STAR). The advisor believed Rudy would benefit from these resources because they were purposefully designed to reach out to students who struggle and need the extra support. I discovered that the program essentially helps students like Rudy develop skills to survive college life.

Rudy also told me the advisor stressed that the smaller class sizes would give him a better chance to succeed. The advisor went on to encourage Rudy to be proactive by asking for help. I asked him what he thought about everything the advisor had mentioned. He admitted that asking for help was something he had trouble doing, but he wanted to be successful and hoped he could do whatever he needed to do to reach his goal.

2. Rudy and Literacy

When we parted, Rudy's literacy involvement mainly revolved around academic materials he needed to read to complete the GED and the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) exam. However, reading was important to Rudy so he did make time for pleasure reading. So, in-between academic studying and attending tutoring sessions in order to pass the GED and excel on the TSI, Rudy found time to follow his other literature interests. The pleasure reading he had been able to treat himself to was targeted towards the background setting of video games and video game testing. He was fascinated by their stories, and he dreamed of developing his own video game someday. Not only did he take his time to devour the manual, but he also researched the game on the Internet. He did have an older, male cousin to whom he could rely whenever he had questions about certain gaming components, like coding and technology issues.

3. Final Reflection

While I was interviewing Rudy I could not help but wonder how he fell through the cracks in the school system. He had a wonderful vocabulary because he liked learning new words. He enjoyed reading and writing and his favorite topic was history. He let me read some of the stories he had been working on for a video game, which did have a colorful plot; however, he could have used help with grammatical conventions and story development, as there were some holes in the plot.

Overall, he admitted that he was not a “brilliant” reader or writer-, and he struggled with both in and out of school. However, the simple fact that he likes to read and write, gives me hope. Rudy knows he needs to get better, and, instead of giving up, he is working on developing those skills. (Personal communication, July 25, 2015). When I asked, “What does it mean to be a development reader?” Rudy gave me a mixed response of negativity and reality. “I know I need those classes, but it shouldn’t make me feel like I don’t belong or that I’m slow or something. I hate being labeled developmental it makes it sound like I’m mental, and I’m not. I can do this; I just need a chance” (personal communication, July 25, 2015).

Hope

What is learning without failure?

What understands without confusion?

What is growing without mistakes?

How do we justify losing students who need the most guidance?

How do we reach students who are afraid of being themselves?

How do we help our students succeed not just for school but for life?

But why should we care?

Students need us to

Believe in them, show them Hope, offer them a Chance, and help them see that Learning is Possible.

Rudy knows that he needs help to develop the skills and strategies to become a more active independent reader and learner. But at the same time, Rudy should not feel like he is being labeled or that he has done something wrong. I feel that those emotions are lingering from childhood experiences in a traditional school setting.

There is great hope and promise for Rudy. He just needs the self-confidence and the help from developmental programs so that he can succeed, not just academically but in the real world.

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