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How to Teach English to At-Risk College Students

By Melissa E. Lee

Over the last 15 or so years, many colleges have seen an influx of a certain type of student. Beneath a show of bravado, these students' classroom demeanor is tentative. Their bursts of confidence are ephemeral; their hands descend as quickly as they are raised. When these students visit our offices, ostensibly to ask questions about homework, their strained expressions explain what their words cannot: They have questions but don't know how to put their thoughts into words. They may understand conceptually why they chose to come to college but don't really understand how to translate that motivation into effort. These students are at risk—at risk of failing, of dropping out, and of losing opportunity.

My observations of educationally at-risk students are drawn from my experiences as an English instructor in the State University of New York system, but the situation is prevalent elsewhere, too, usually at public universities and community colleges.

At-risk students usually share one or more of the following obstacles: Their families live below the poverty line, they are black or Hispanic, they come from single-parent homes, their mothers have less than a high-school education, the primary language spoken at home is not English. A report by the National Center for Education Statistics, "Programs at Higher Education Institutions for Disadvantaged Precollege Students" (2005), adds to that list one more risk factor: belonging to "the first generation in the family to attend college." A 2009 article in the National Education Association's Higher Education Journal explains the impediments first-generation college students can face: "parental ambivalence, lack of understanding, and even hostility to [the] child's college plans."

In order to help at-risk students to succeed—and thereby to succeed ourselves as instructors—we must meet students where they are. Of course, that doesn't mean holding their hands to the extent that they forget that they alone are responsible for their studies. But the only ethical thing for instructors to do is to try to
be as accommodating as possible.

Three practices are essential in helping at-risk students:

**Provide structure in the classroom.** I am continually surprised by my students' gratitude toward me for the daily agendas I write on the board. Though all instructors surely understand how helpful it is to provide structure for students, it seems that doing so isn't a very common practice in many classrooms these days.

Instructors should map out a master plan for each class session. I write the day, the date, and the word "Agenda," under which I place three or four bullet points followed by my plan of attack. My students have told me they appreciate the sense of direction that the day's agenda provides.

Instructors can also offer periodic final-grade predictions to help students understand how each assignment contributes to the whole course grade. I like to calculate the final grade each student will end up with, based upon the ones he or she has already earned, combined with hypothetical perfect scores on the remaining assignments; then hand out the reports (printed in an easy-to-read grid) on unimposing half-sheets of paper. The motivation students display after receiving such signifiers of the semester's structure is mind-boggling.

Finally, at the end of every day, I send out an e-mail to students who were absent. I try to include the key elements of the class, explain the homework, and attach copies of any handouts. Some may criticize this practice of filling in for absent students as a crutch that encourages them to skip class. But I still have a strict absence policy, and their absences do indeed count against them. The e-mail is just my way of letting absent students know that the world will move right along without them if they don't get with the program. I consider my message a compassionate reminder of this fact of life—which some of them have never have learned before.

**Show the connection between classroom learning and the real world.** To help your students understand the practical applications of what they're learning, try to link everything to the real world. For example, I have created a course unit called "Real-World Writing." It includes lessons on how to write effective résumés and cover letters, as well as letters of resignation and even obituaries. Students learn about the concept of different audiences far more quickly and effectively through such real-world writing than they do through essay assignments—which come later in the semester, after I've hooked their interest with work they perceive
as more directly relevant to their lives.

**Make your students accountable.** Students generally work harder on their homework assignments if they are required to meet with the instructor and present their work aloud—especially if they are then graded on that oral presentation. As an undergraduate, I studied abroad at the University of Oxford, where the tutorial model is used widely. My Oxonian tutorials were terrifying and humbling, and served to hone my academic discipline more effectively than any other academic experience I have ever had.

Now I subject my students to the same experience. It is nothing short of amazing to see how much energy they put into papers when they know they'll have to present and defend their work face to face—as opposed to their usual, more lackadaisical efforts, which involve typing mindlessly until 5 a.m., then sneaking the shoddy result under my door and failing to show up to class later that day.

Many students in the public and community-college systems don't know what it takes to succeed academically at the college level. It's the downside of the welcoming, egalitarian spirit of our admissions departments. There are simply more steps that we as educators must take to accommodate our students' needs. The principles of organization, connection, and accountability, elementary as they may seem, can reap tremendous results in terms of students' success.

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I appreciate this advice. I'd love to develop an even longer list of suggestions, though. Does anyone have more to add (I haven't read all the comments yet). Thanks!

P.S.
I would especially like to figure out how to get students to do routine homework assignments (not papers), such as reading the text and doing exercises. I find myself in a bind because if I grade everything, a lot of students still don't complete the work and soon they get discouraged by a lot of poor grades. If I don't grade (even if I just put a plus checkmark or minus checkmark on it), they are even less motivated to put any thought or effort into doing it.

Have you tried having students show you a marked text in order to demonstrate that they've read it?

"But the only ethical thing for instructors to do is to try to be as accommodating as possible." What?! Seriously? Like there's a syllabus for 19-year old single moms who are on welfare? Or a syllabus for the student with emotional problems? Really? Where is the integrity of the course? Of the instructor for that matter? Just say, "Everyone gets and A," and be done with it, because that's the ONLY accommodation students want.

Ask any FT tenure-track faculty from a SUNY CommColl if she has the time to pamper and persuade the students who are falling behind. The answer is NO. Not with a 13-15-credit course load per semester, required service and scholarship activities. Oh, and please Ms. Lee, your stereotypes about these "underprepared" immigrant poor students of color don't wash. You're only feeding into the myth of inferiority and continuing the vicious "pity them" cycle that got many of these students in this situation in the first place.

For example, the CUNY CommColl students of this demographic (whom I've worked with) are often very hard workers who also achieve without being coddled. They appreciate the value of higher education and don't feel the need to blame others for their mediocrity. Most of the SUNY CommColl students I've met are white, suburban, blue-collar / lower-middle-class and feel entitled to be rewarded for effort, rather than quality of the product. Oh, and if the faculty member happens to be a person of color (or young, or female), you can expect the quality of the student evaluations will be lower.

Ms. Lee's attempts to acclimate her students reads more of her being a "mother figure" than a professor. Certainly, if a man were to have written this, I would be shocked. Women are expected to be maternal to their "ever-struggling and ever-so-needy" students, which is total BS. She's willing to play that role, and as an adjunct, she has the time to. For junior faculty though, they are already spread QUITE thin and I question whether these efforts will benefit the faculty member in the end. Instead, students will take, take, complain and still take without even a "thank you" or fair evaluation. If there is to be real, genuine equity in the higher education system, it has to start with NOT passing along trouble students who haven't earned the grade. There's no reason a functionally illiterate (or needs much remediation) student should have gotten an "A" in Composition 1, is there? So even with Ms. Lee's standards, if she's getting students in her class who have (1) poor skills (2) never been held accountable and (3) want the status quo, there is NOTHING she can do to help them. If the English course is required, most of the students don't want to be there, and making yourself think you can coddle them into your favor is a delusion.

If they can't do the work, fail them. Otherwise, write a piece about the merits of teaching "See Spot Run" and call it what it really is: Dumbing down the curriculum, thus boosting their confidence, meanwhile keeping them from being competitive in a rigorous high-educational setting.
Well, well, periwinkleblue! Despite criticizing Prof. Lee for stereotyping her students, you certainly engage in a lot of the same behavior yourself! By recognizing the special difficulties that her students face, Prof. Lee tries to cope realistically with how best to help them succeed. You, on the other hand, literally divide students into "poor students of color" and "white . . .," characterizing the latter as entitled. Talk about stereotyping!

Moreover, nothing in Prof. Lee's article suggests that she is adopting a role of "mother figure." Your labeling her as such smacks of projection. You also assert that she has the time to be a mother figure because she is an adjunct. The unfounded assumption, of course, is that adjuncts have more time than full-time faculty because they don't teach as many courses. But if you attend to what has been reported time and again in the Chronicle, you will learn that most adjuncts cobble together many courses from different institutions (or work other jobs) to try to make ends meet.

Finally, Prof. Lee says nothing that would suggest that a functionally illiterate students should get an "A" in any course, much less hers. Indeed, her three principles are directed toward holding students accountable for achieving a higher standard of work than they otherwise might. She isn't coddling them. Your only suggestion? Flunk 'em!

Had you offered a single constructive suggestion, I might take your comments more seriously. Your carping, ad hominem attack, however, is merely tiresome and irrelevant to what Prof. Lee actually wrote.

At-risk students are often intelligent enough to do the work, but they may not have the tools required to do it. If you don't meet students where they are, chances are they're going to fail, but it seems that student success doesn't matter to you.

Don't give them fish...show them how to fish. These students need a thick skin to succeed in life. Coddling is the wrong way to go. I would never calculate grade scenarios for students. I do, however, show them the mathematical formula for calculating themselves how well they need to perform for the remainder of the course to achieve the desired outcome. They should be able to do this from the grade distribution provided on any syllabus.

Also, it is the responsibility of absentee students to contact the instructor, not vice versa. The main job of any college educator is to equip students with the stamina and abilities to manage what life deals them and thus keep them accountable for their actions. The lack of effort and discipline currently apparent in many of today's students' performances is a direct result of overindulgent parents and teachers of the 90s. Tough love is the best you can do for them.

I disagree that emailing students is a bad move. At risk students need to know someone is paying attention, and that they can still succeed. Quitting is easy, trying is hard, and if our goal is to keep students in school to give them the opportunities higher ed affords -- and as a developmental educator, that is precisely my goal -- then students need to know that their teachers care, that someone is noticing, and that they didn't destroy their chances with one mistake or one bad week. Comm college especially is not a place for gate keeping strategies. I think Lee's article presents a great balance of the kind of policies that hold students to high standards while encouraging and engaging them. Working with at-risk students has incredible rewards. Watching students who by all accounts SHOULD be failing thrive and succeed is the best part of my work as a college teacher. Lee's strategies are excellent.
I particularly like the idea that the email is a gentle reminder that the world is going to go on without them. I have conscientious students come back to class after absences with doctors’ notes and so forth, but then they don’t realize, somehow, that having a legitimate excuse doesn’t mean they are not responsible for keeping up. Helping them figure out how to do this themselves seems like one of the greatest services we can do them.

Although I don’t chase down students who are not present, I do many of the other things that Ms. Lee does. After teaching at-risk students developmental courses for over 10 years, I also

1) give a day-to-day calendar for the complete semester to students on the 1st day of class; I have the class help me review it, then quiz them on it;
2) scaffold assignments from smaller more manageable work to larger more challenging work;
3) do lots of feedback loops (it's more grading, but it's worth it)
4) use an original, progressive "sliding scale" rubric for peer review of outlines, paragraphs and essay drafts;
5) break down reading into daily work and then give a 2-3 multiple choice "mini-quiz" on the reading every day.
6) don't allow make up or late work for daily assignments; only major work (essays, tests) can be done late if documentation holds up.
7) have students work in teams on skills level work out of textbooks; after modeling 1 successful exercise, I allow each team to "choose" the item they want to present to the class;
8) model everything before students are asked to work; I collect student work and with signed permission, I show it to students the next semester;
9) after modeling work, I give out a rubric for that item and then "show students" how I grade it; I do this right in front of them on an overhead; this demystifies the grading process and allows students to see and feel what's most important;
10) do all I can to have students' "voices" present in the classroom; class discussion is only 1 small piece of this; using sample student work is another; having student teams make up their own exercises to use for practice is another;
11) not only have a structured classroom, but also have some strict class policies about handling cell phones or goofing off online; I dismiss students who disregard these; this helps others see that the classroom is a place for learning.
12) separate the person from the performance; if a student messes up, I hold them to the policy that applies and then don't hold it against him or her the next time I see him or her; I have students who have failed my class and still come talk to me in my office semesters later.

As a first-generation student myself who came from the wrong side of the tracks, I know that I didn't want to be babied; still, I appreciated it when faculty trusted me with the course calendar and held me to strict standards like anyone else. As an instructor, it's important that I keep control of the classroom while creating an atmosphere where students feel included and valued for their background and experience. I love teaching developmental courses. It's my passion. I've met others who feel this way, too. I'm glad we're in a position to serve this student population.

Thanks for a concrete list of what you do. That is very helpful for those of us interested in trying new ways to reach our students.

I'm dealing with lots of problematic students — many first generation students — and realizing that holding Research 1 ranked university expectations of what they should know is just going to make me a bitter old man. In an attempt to rectify some of the problems they have from Ontario's K-12 system, I'm looking to provide some scaffolding / carrots to augment my high standards / sticks. I'm planning on introducing a revision process to my lower-level courses (economic geography; intro to quantitative methods for geographers), as well as explicit lectures and discussions about how to write clearly, how to make arguments and how to substantiate arguments. At the same time, I'd like to make sure that all my classes offer the magic 20+ pages of writing per semester along with 40+ pages of reading a week a-la Arum & Roksa's _Academically Adrift_.

In particular, I've read a bit about designing rubrics (I found Stevens & Levi _Introduction to rubrics_ very helpful for new ideas) so I can develop better ones. You mention in point 4 "an original, sliding rubric...". Could you clarify what you mean?

Also, for point 5, could you elaborate on how long your average weekly readings are? And are they...
mainly of textbooks? Journal articles? Book chapters? Popular literature? News? I have colleagues that use all of these in various mixes, and I am now considering adding more material from trade non-fiction sources.

Anyway, thanks for the helpful post

Elsie's Dad

visby 1 month ago

To periwinkleblue 1 day ago - 4th paragraph:

A quote from your diatribe:

"She's willing to play that role, and as an adjunct, she has the time to.*

Let me guess: you are some sort of digruntled, and tenured of course, PhD who feels threatened by an adjunct. Oh my, the woe adjuncts bring to world at large, especially education. In fact you do not have any idea about her, the terms of her adjunct position, the fact that she (as all adjuncts) have another life that is demanding too, and certainly you have no understanding of her dedication. It is not about agreement with her methods, that is to be expected since we are all different. Even you have ideas, although not very well articulated.

Open your eyes to the world and get out of your shell.

wilkenslibrary 1 month ago

When I taught a developmental English class several years ago, most of my students were white, lower-middle class, twenty-something, first generation college who had not done well in high school, had been working at jobs that didn't pay well and didn't challenge them, and had come to realize that they needed more education to change their lives. They generally did not see themselves as readers or writers and frequently struggled with both skills. One of them told me at the end of the semester that she loved my class because I didn't act condescendingly toward them. I was amazed, and told her that, while I can write a good paragraph, I could not fix a car, which she could do. We all have things that we're good at, and we all have successful ways of teaching, but this young woman made it clear to me that, beyond techniques and tricks, attitude counts.

Betsy Smith
Adjunct Professor of ESL
Cape Cod Community College

tsb2010 1 month ago

Very interesting - which makes me think about what we actually want to achieve by pushing more and more people through a college that has the lowered standards that we have today? Why not concentrate on a solid education from ground up - and then maybe a high school diploma might be again worth something.

11274135 1 month ago

The "friends of rigor and quality" (e.g Periwinkleblue) always like snidely to characterize instructors like Ms Lee for being wishy washy liberal "mother" types with no standards. P and his buddies are of the "throw-them-in-the-water-and-see-if-they-can-swim" school of education. Tough guys. The idea is that swimming is somehow an innate skill that will suddenly emerge when needed. Well, often it doesn't, and people drown. Sometimes through an heroic will to survive, people make it to shore, but you could barely
call it swimming, they are terrified, and they are unlikely to go near the water again. However, if you actually taught them to swim, they would, they would overcome their fears, they would learn to swim well, and they might actually enjoy being in the water with a sense of confidence and safety.

What's so good about "tough"? How about "smart" or "intelligent"? I am so weary of hearing legislators at all levels bragging about their courage in making "tough" choices when they are cutting education and support services for the poor. But are those "smart" or "intelligent" choices? It seems like we're always celebrating being "tough" when we are sticking it to the least advantaged members of our society in what appears to be a concerted effort to keep them that way.

We need more educated people for this country to be successful. This means we have to help the least advantaged members of our society succeed in learning to learn, becoming educated, and enjoying lifelong learning. Ms. Lee might be able to do this. P and the tough guys? They may never learn. It's challenging to teach students who actually need teaching.

I applaud what Ms. Lee has written. I teach Freshman Composition at a 4-year state university and use a similar methodology. One additional strategy that I use is small groups (4-5 students) to generate ideas for developing thesis statements. Each student must volunteer ideas to a communal list that then functions as prewriting. Students appreciate the help and enjoy getting to know their peers. I also use peer reviewing of essays that I monitor. I then read and mark the essay and affix the grade. Our motto is: Learn from your mistakes, so students are allowed to rewrite their essays for a higher grade. Coddling? I don't think so because they truly learn from their mistakes.

How do I know that students benefit from these experiences? They write about it in their weekly journals that I read and comment upon weekly. Yes, there is much grading involved, but I have the luxury of teaching one or two classes per semester. I realize that most adjuncts can't subsist on one or two classes. I am truly fortunate. By the way, I teach mostly Latino students from working class homes.

I'm sorry for asking the obvious pink-elephant-in-the-room question here: if somebody can't express themselves in English, why are they at a University? There are many skills and trades that don't require a bachelor's degree. These kids presumably graduated from a high school - and the question is further: why were they allowed to graduate? The sad, simple answer is: because we care about graduation rates (high school, college, etc) more than the quality of who we graduate - and we just pass on the problem to the next higher level.
How does Ms. Lee find the time to do all this? I teach four classes a semester as an adjunct, plus I pick up odd jobs editing on the side. I feel like I am struggling to hold my head above water just to keep up with the 500 essays I grade each semester.

I have no complaint with most of Dr. Lee's suggestions, although some seem more workable than others. But why is this article about teaching English to at-risk students? Everything Dr. Lee says is applicable to all courses at-risk students might take.

"offer periodic final-grade predictions to help students understand how each assignment contributes to the whole course grade"

This should be handled by the CHE article "How to Teach Math to At-Risk College Students"

One challenge we face is that more and more students are "at risk" due to the dismal state of K-12 education. There is absolutely no incentive other than compassion to do anything to accommodate students who are completely oblivious to the demands of higher education. These kids are like travelers entering foreign lands for which they have no preparatory experience. We can blame the culture, the parents or the K-12 schools, but the fact remains that these students show up in our classes and we have to deal with them. Does anyone realize that adjuncts are paid around $2k to teach most classes?

Dr. Lee is heroic, not maternal. She is trying to fill a gap that no one seems willing to address other than through lip service. Colleges don't want to spend money on remediation, but they want persistence. Some of these students are reading and writing at an elementary school level when we encounter them as freshmen. Privately illustrating their skill deficits without using condescending language or embarrassing them publicly seems ideal and technology creates those opportunities.

We are doing these students a disservice if we do not communicate our cultural expectations via email and all the other technologies that they already use. Watering classes down is not the answer. I like the suggestions to hold them accountable. We also have to be realistic and recognize that colleges can't make up the serious deficits that these kids come out of high school with. Some may never be capable of devoting the time and energy to mastering college level work. This is the reality, though we might hope otherwise.

For me, as a teacher before, I can say that you need to make a strong connection with your students. You have to make them feel important and that they need to learn and pass. You need to show support and optimism over the efforts that they do.
I appreciate the time and care Ms. Lee takes with her students. I run programs for first-generation, low-income students and understand very deeply the difference between coddling and attempting to level the playing field. I applaud all the positive comments and helpful suggestions from those who have an understanding of our students! Keep up the good work! Our students really do succeed when we view the world from their lens.

I am surprised that no one had a problem with labeling these students "at-risk." I am also surprised that just about everyone who commented here was presumably second generation, or more, college graduate. I am confused by the fact that we went through several generations of first-generation, having very little English, and making "do" with less than perfect public schools for generations. It appears that the more our schools, whether State, Community, or Selective Private, open their doors to students of color, the more there is a problem with these students. This discussion happens across the board - "what do we do about the "at-risk" students?" and "how do we teach the "at-risk" students?" I would suggest we teach them the same way we teach the "others" but stop labeling them and expecting them to drop-out or fail. Do not treat them like they do not belong and are a "problem." They, just like all other first generation students have more resolve, less sense of entitlement, and more pressure to "make it" than any other college student. Support their efforts by letting them know they have work to do and expecting them to do it. If they need to do a re-write, allow them a re-write. Revisit why you are teaching on the college level. If it is to have a student body who could teach themselves whether you were there or not, you are at the wrong school. Maybe you do not have control over that at the moment (your choice or the economy's) but as soon as you can, realize that these students are not "at-risk" they are striving and ambitious just like any other student anxious for a chance with no one to save them if they fail. Support them and stop labeling them and trying to figure out what is wrong with them. By the way, I am a tenure track professor at a private school who got to college on a four year scholarship as a first generation black student and went on to earn a full fellowship to graduate school and multiple fellowships to complete my dissertation. If someone had told me I was at risk, I would have left... not to drop-out but to transfer. The school that told me I was "at-risk" would have been the wrong school for me. Maybe we need to figure out if that is what we really want these students to do. The discussion that I read here, in both the essay and the comments suggests an expectation of failure followed by a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Blackboard is essential for the housekeeping duties described above. Grading, especially, is centralized and traceable. The contact info for each student is readily available. I web enhance even my live class sections and student appreciate that. I've even put some of the lectures online for those who are unable to attend class (for a million different reasons...)

If only there were an app to link Facebook with Blackboard! If students (and some faculty) logged in to Blackboard with as much enthusiasm and frequency as Blackboard, we would really be on to something!

The accountability issues are key. Nice tactics!