

The Worst Best Friend

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The Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC): Preparing All Students for College and Career

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The challenges that English teachers face in teaching expository reading and writing are no secret to the readers of this journal. Lack of time, student apathy, state testing concerns, prescribed curriculum, and a host of other challenges confront teachers across the state as they struggle to prepare their students for the demands of college and career.

Jose is a high school English teacher who has been teaching for three years in an inner city school. He spends considerable time grappling with how to best prepare his college bound students for the rigors of reading and writing at the college level. As a second career teacher who also spent several years employed in the publishing industry, he realizes that the same skills needed by his college bound students are now required of any student seeking post secondary training—even those not interested in attending two or four year schools. Whether reading and writing in college or in their chosen careers, young people will benefit from becoming critical readers, writers, and thinkers. Jose is like all good high school teachers—he wants his students to be successful once they graduate. But when students have such different needs and goals, how can he ensure success for each one of them?

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As a way to better meet the needs of all of his students, Jose—like over 2200 educators from across the state—has recently started using the Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC). When asked by colleagues about this new curriculum, Jose usually finds himself answering three questions: 1) What is the ERWC and how was it developed? 2) What makes this curriculum effective? and 3) Where can teachers go to learn more about the ERWC Curriculum and Trainings?

What is the ERWC and how was it developed?

Many students are leaving California high schools without the critical reading, writing, and thinking skills expected of them in college and post secondary training (Intersegmental Committee, 2000). For example, close to 50% of all incoming freshmen need remedial English courses (Conley, 2007). As a way to better support high school teachers in their quest to prepare their college bound students, the California State University system invited CSU faculty and high school teachers and administrators to create a curriculum that could serve as a bridge between high school and college.

Since 2004, the Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC) has served as the English component of the CSU's Early Assessment Program (EAP), which tests students' English and math proficiency in the 11th grade. The

curriculum focuses on critical reading and analytical writing assignments involving essays and other expository texts. It also provides in-depth study of analytical and argumentative reading and writing, rather than the more traditional curricular focus on British and American literature.

The ERWC is aligned with the California English-Language Arts Content Standards. The curriculum, designed to prepare students for college level English and for academic reading and writing tasks in other core college courses, includes an assignment template and an accompanying series of primarily non-fiction texts (Merrill & Fletcher, 2007). The ERWC consists of 14 assignments, also referred to as units or modules. Each module is composed of a sequence of integrated reading and writing experiences that take roughly two to four weeks to complete, depending on students' needs, teacher interests, and school district guidelines. There are "teacher" and "student" versions of each assignment. For teachers, an assignment template organizes the assignments, which include pre-reading activities, reading and post-reading activities, and formal writing assignments. The teacher version of the template includes detailed recommendations for instruction, potential student responses, and assessment tools. Along the way, students learn to make predictions about texts, analyze both content and rhetorical structures, and properly use materials

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from the texts they read to support their own written arguments. The student versions of the assignment templates are designed to facilitate flexibility in teaching. Teachers can make decisions regarding which handouts to reproduce and distribute to students to facilitate suggested learning activities.

Statewide, more than 2,200 high school educators have attended workshops and received professional development. In the four-day workshops, spread out over several months, curriculum is provided to teachers, who can then integrate the ERWC materials into their existing courses or use the curriculum as an independent 11th or 12th grade class. Furthermore, the curriculum—when taught as a stand alone course—satisfies CSU and University of California college entrance requirements, meeting the “B” requirement of the University of California. To date, approximately 40 local school districts have adopted the full ERWC course in either grade 11 or 12, and approximately 400 high schools throughout the state have sent teachers to the four-day professional development.

What makes this curriculum effective?

Teachers report that a rhetorical approach to texts and high-interest, issue-driven reading materials are two of the keys to the ERWC’s effectiveness. As one teacher from southern

California explained, “The nice thing about the ERWC materials is that students can grasp the ideas and get excited about them. Many of my seniors have not written numerous essays to date, so just to get them to write has been great...now when their professors assign them analytical reading and writing, they’re not going to be surprised ... I know these kids have made huge leaps.” (CB, Bakersfield)

Unlike some nonfiction curricula, the ERWC recognizes that expository texts can promote the same level of critical thinking and student engagement as rich works of literature. The materials and activities in the ERWC thus invite students and their teachers to enter meaningful cultural conversations with skill and confidence—and to move beyond simplistic, formulaic responses to informational text. For example, students in an ERWC class spend a great deal of time deconstructing the persuasive strategies writers use in editorials. One module engages students in an analysis of *The New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert’s article, “Hounding the Innocent,”—an op-ed piece on racial profiling. After surveying the text and examining their own attitudes toward the topic, students work through a series of critical reading and writing processes as they develop their understanding of Herbert’s argument. They look closely at Herbert’s language, analyze his

Figure I: Template Overview

READING RHETORICALLY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · PREREADING · READING · POST-READING
<p>Prereading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Getting Ready to Read · Surveying the Text · Making Predictions and Asking Questions · Introducing Key Vocabulary
<p>Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · First Reading · Looking Closely at Language · Rereading the Text · Analyzing Stylistic Choices · Considering the Structure of the Text
<p>Post-reading Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Summarizing and Responding · Thinking Critically
CONNECTING READING TO WRITING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · WRITING TO LEARN · USING THE WORDS OF OTHERS
WRITING RHETORICALLY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · PREWRITING · WRITING · REVISING AND EDITING · EVALUATING AND RESPONDING
<p>Prewriting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Reading the Assignment · Getting Ready to Write · Formulating a Working Thesis
<p>Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Composing a Draft · Organizing the Essay · Developing the Content
<p>Revising and Editing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Revising the Draft · Editing the Draft · Reflecting on the Writing
<p>Evaluating and Responding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Grading Holistically · Responding to Student Writing · Using Portfolios

stylistic choices, consider the structure of the text, summarize his position, and then frame their own responses to his claims. Students later apply this critical awareness to their own writing. In their summative essay on a controversial issue, students make intentional choices about their own persuasive strategies, considering how such elements as evidence, tone, organization, persona, counterarguments, logic, and emotional language impact their essays' purpose and effectiveness.

This unique approach was developed from seven core principles:

1. The integration of interactive reading and writing processes;
2. A rhetorical approach to texts that fosters critical thinking;
3. Materials and themes that engage student interest and provide a foundation for principled debate and argument;
4. Classroom activities designed to model and foster successful practices of fluent readers and writers;
5. Research-based methodologies with a consistent relationship between theory and practice;
6. Built-in flexibility to allow teachers to respond to varied students' needs and instructional context; and
7. Alignment with English-Language Arts Content Standards.

Taken together, these “Key Principles of an Effective Expository Reading and Writing Course” (CSU Task Force, [forthcoming, 2008]) create a college preparatory literacy curriculum that is unlike any other model currently available to teachers.

Rhetorical reading and writing are at the heart of the first four principles. As students read rigorous, persuasive texts and learn to focus on the rhetorical structures required by college course work such as argument, purpose, strategy, and context,

they develop the habits of mind of successful scholars. These habits include the ability to exhibit curiosity, understand and respect diverse perspectives, and challenge their own assumptions (ICAS, p. 13). According to a survey of college faculty, these rhetorical abilities are essential for success in higher education (ICAS, p. 22). Professors expect students to “critically analyze the ideas and arguments of others” (ICAS, p. 22) and to be aware “that rhetorics of argumentation and interrogation are calibrated to disciplines, purposes, and audiences” (ICAS, p. 14).

The materials and themes in the ERWC help students develop both their conceptual and procedural knowledge of rhetorical abilities. For instance, one module by John Edlund includes “Three Ways to Persuade”—an article that outlines Aristotle’s discussion of ethical, emotional, and logical appeals to audiences (i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos). Students then use their knowledge of rhetorical appeals and strategies to analyze ERWC texts from a broad range of contemporary topics, including the fast food industry; the juvenile justice system; animal rights; hip hop; language, gender and culture; and school bullying. In contrast to the “workplace documents” used by some expository curricula, the ERWC offers students and teachers authentic examples of high-quality texts (many are from national newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*) that students might encounter in college composition courses. These texts are paired with classroom activities “designed to model and foster successful practices of fluent readers and writers”—in other words, the “what” and “how” of academic literacy. As students internalize the practices of rhetorical readers and writers, they become increasingly independent editors of their own work and more able to skillfully articulate their perspectives through both talk

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I know that I can do it,
I can fight with it.”

(JD, Bakersfield)

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and writing. A young woman in an ERWC course in southern California acknowledged this growing independence: “When I started out, I was a very mediocre essay writer [...] but now I enjoy writing essays. Before I used to hide from them, I wouldn’t do them, I would get bad grades, but now when I write them, I know that I can do it, I can fight with it” (JD, Bakersfield). In conversations with students working with the ERWC throughout California, the authors found that many, like this young woman, now feel more able to take up a rhetorical stance toward the texts they read, and see themselves as capable of wrestling with their own writing. In short, they are demanding more of themselves and feeling good about it. A student from rural Lake County noted that the ERWC “gave us a way to think for ourselves once we go out to the real world.” Students appreciate the currency of topics in the ERWC and see that the reading and writing activities they engage in connect with their out-of-school lives.

Whereas effective literacy practices inform the first four of the seven key principles, effective pedagogy is at the heart of the last three. The “ERWC Assignment Template” is an impressive expression of highly successful, research-based practices, according to leading teachers and scholars. By addressing the importance of research, classroom contexts, and learning outcomes, the assignment template serves as an organizer for teacher success. Its integrated reading and writing processes scaffold complexity and thoroughness, and its three essential qualities – depth, rigor and intensity – all potentially contribute to increased teacher efficacy and student success.

The combined strength of the “Key Principles of an Effective Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum” thus makes the ERWC an unusually effective agent for student achievement and college access (see Cline, Bissell, Hafner, & Katz, 2007).

Where can teachers go to learn more about the ERWC Curriculum and Trainings?

ERWC professional development opportunities are widely advertised and supported throughout the state of California. Learning how to make reading materials accessible to students and how to better align high school curricula with college expectations are two of the most important goals of the ERWC professional development opportunities. As one participant noted, "It helps a great deal to understand exactly what [my students] need to do when it comes to college-level writing" (JS, Bakersfield). The workshops also offer ways to adopt the ERWC in districts and schools. Teachers may receive the materials for the ERWC by attending either a series of four-day ERWC workshops for English teachers or a Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP) for high school and community college instructors. The modules and their theoretical underpinnings are examined, modeled, explained, and practiced during the workshops.

Offered jointly by County Offices of Education and the CSU system to high school English teachers, the ERWC workshops offer teachers the skills and resources necessary to teach the Expository Reading and Writing Course. In addition, participants have opportunities to share their experiences with colleagues about teaching the curriculum, practical uses, and modifications to meet the needs of specific classrooms.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to practice scoring authentic student writing.

During RIAP, teachers learn similar techniques based on the same curriculum template. Teachers have time to share and develop their own expository modules, based on the strategies suggested in the ERWC. Since RIAP is designed for instructors in all subject areas (grades 9-12 and community college), the goal is to broaden teachers' capacity to teach reading and concentrate on teaching academic literacy across the curriculum.

Both RIAP and ERWC workshop participants receive invitations to join the ERWC's online community that houses the curricular materials electronically and connects teachers across the state, enabling them to share ideas about teaching the curriculum. To learn more about the Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum, teachers may visit their county's ERWC web site and register for a local four-day workshop. Additional information sites can be found in Figure 2.

Final Thoughts

Critical reading, writing, and thinking skills are the cornerstone for successfully engaging in a learning process that begins in K-12 education and continues for a lifetime. In this constantly shifting world, colleges and universities are preparing students for lives and careers that will require ongoing inquiry and learning. As such, it is especially important that we help

Figure 2

- Early Assessment Program Home Page
 - www.calstate.edu/eap
- English Success Web Site
 - www.csuenglishsuccess.org
- Expository Reading and Writing Course Web Site
 - www.calstate.edu/eap/englishcourse
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
 - www.calstate.edu/eap/documents/eapfaqfinal.pdf

young people develop the ability to think for themselves, to critically analyze information, and to decide what is credible, what is missing, and what begs to be capably challenged (Street, 2006). Since reading and writing are recognized as vital skills in both post secondary education and the workplace, students must graduate from their K-12 schooling as competent readers and writers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Cultivating the critical literacies necessary for college and career success across diverse social and cultural contexts should be one of the primary responsibilities of every high school teacher. For teachers such as Jose, who care deeply about the future success of all students, the ERWC emerges as a viable way to help ensure that students have the academic tools and resources needed to adeptly and knowledgeably participate in the global 21st century.

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