

Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

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Stretch Composition

The Simple Principles of Stretch Composition

- Separate developmental courses imply well-defined points that divide one writing course in a sequence from another. This assumption, drawn from other disciplines such as developmental mathematics, does not take into account what the research shows—that writing and language competence develops recursively, not linearly and incrementally.
- Students can be offered different paths to the same end-point. Some paths might involve a single course, others more than one course.
- The most important determinant of the effectiveness of writing instruction is time. Some students need more time to attain competency; others can achieve it in less time.

The Design of the Pilot

The initial pilot would involve less than 300 students out of an incoming first-year class of 1,800-2,000. Six sections of ENGL 110ABC and eight sections of ENGL 112AB would be offered in 2010-2011.

ENGL 110ABC: Stretch Composition (30-week first year writing course)

ENGL 112AB: Accelerated Stretch Composition (20-week first year writing course)

The Composition Committee has presented to the English Department a proposal to pilot stretch composition at CSULA. Much remains to be resolved and many levels of approval are still required, but the initial response has been encouraging.

Some might wonder why the department is considering changing its developmental writing program. A recent assessment found that CSULA students were effectively placed, successfully prepared, and ultimately retained at a higher rate than non-developmental students. While the success of the current program is impressive, stretch composition offers the promise of even greater successes while retaining what has so far proven most effective.

First implemented in the early 1990s at Arizona State University, stretch composition is based on a simple principle: some students need more time and more experience to develop competence in and confidence with academic writing. Stretch composition takes the “content” of a first-year writing course (such as ENGL 101) and “stretches” it over two or three quarters of instruction. The “content” of ENGL 101, of course, is not so much a thing or even a skill—it is a complex intellectual, social, and cultural activity best developed in communities over time.

Time and community are two of the three characteristics found in all stretch composition programs. When given more time to write, revise, and discuss writing, students do better with their writing coursework and feel better about their learning experience, especially when that experience takes place within a community of writers. Cohort models, where students stay with the same instructor and same students, lead to effective learning (and writing) communities and allow

the instructor to determine pacing and even curriculum appropriate to a specific group of students. The third key characteristic of stretch programs is college credit for all writing classes. College-level work should be rewarded with college-level credit. Since both the stretch version and the un-stretched version of ENGL 101 achieve the same learning objectives, stretch courses should be credit-bearing.

Research from the last decade conclusively supports the effectiveness of the stretch model. Programs that have adopted stretch models have seen a conclusive rise in student retention, pass rates, and performance. These benefits can be traced to the following:

- Because stretch programs are “college-level,” students are no longer stigmatized as “remedial.”
- Because stretch programs use cohorts, student engagement increases.
- Because stretch programs keep students and instructors together, classes are able to build on content and skills from prior quarters and achieve nearly seamless curricular alignment.
- Because the stretched nature of the courses effectively teaches writing and revision as a task to be completed over time, students perform better on writing tasks in their majors.

Much work remains to be done, from data gathering and report writing to course design and development. Course design begins with a relatively easy question: What would a two-quarter or one-year ENGL 101 look like? We often think to ourselves, “If only I had these students for a little longer...” With the stretch model, we will have them for a little longer. What will we do?