READERS MATTER: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INDIVIDUALIZED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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Abstract

Public school teachers and university faculty alike are responsible for the literacy levels of graduating students; however, many educators are not implementing the adequate literacy supports within their content area courses resulting in high school graduates not being prepared for the rigors and complexity of college reading. This project used current research on best practice in literacy instruction to create the Readers Matter™ evaluative process in which university faculty members self-select to be assessed regarding their current levels of student literacy support. After scoring the assessment, evaluators provided individualized professional development targeting areas of weakness made evident by the Readers Matter™ rubric. The current study evaluated five university instructors at a mid-sized university in the south-central United States. The results of this research identified the data collection procedures that were beneficial and ultimately informative in the evaluation process and enabled developers to make informed decisions regarding individualized professional development.

Keywords: college reading; professional development; college readiness

1. Statement of the Problem

This research examines aspects of a major problem of student success in college. Students across the United States are entering postsecondary institutions underprepared for the rigors and complexity of college reading. There are a few reasons why students are not reading to comprehend the information necessary to learn independently at the college level. The first reason is quite simple; students may have elected to not purchase the textbook from which assignments are made. In one study, this number of students not purchasing a textbook is as high as approximately 70% of the students enrolled in an introductory course (Sikorski et al., 2001). Another component to failing to comply with assigned reading is that students know from experience, peers who have taken the course, or in some cases, the word of the professor, that reading is just not necessary to pass the course. Motivating students to learn requires, in most cases, incentive to comply with instructor requests (Brophy, 1987).

If students believe that reading is not a relevant component to the equation of learning, it is unlikely they comply with requests to read. Many students also fail to read the content because they have no purpose or direction when reading. Professors may make reading assignments that are never authenticated by students being responsible for that material on a test, in class discussions, assignments, or quizzes. It will not take long for a busy college student to know what is and is not essential to read.   As a result of these behaviors from both students and professors, reading has become an inessential component to many courses on college campuses. Students come to college without the necessary skills and strategies to read the complex and high volume assignments, so they choose not to attempt to do so. Professors are finding that there is little class participation and poor scores on exams and quizzes because their students are not reading. As this process has evolved, behaviors on the part of professors and instructors have changed.

Some professors no longer require a textbook, some passively assign readings, and some will simply give students every necessary piece of information through lecture or presentation, all to avoid the appropriate use of written text. Students are becoming even more impacted in their inadequacies and the quality of education is suffering from the inappropriate accommodating practices of professors. It is, however, important to note that the majority of professors at the university level do not have a background in education or teaching practices. Depending on their area of expertise, many may have little knowledge of human learning and andragogy. It should come as no surprise that professors whose backgrounds are rich in specific content and are research oriented, have little idea of how to impact student success by enhancing literacy levels. One way to address this need is by developing innovative professional development models to increase the effectiveness of instruction and the support of underprepared students.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop and test the *Readers Matter™* assessment at a mid-sized university in the south-central United States. This pilot study prepares the foundation for the framework of implementing a professional development model devised to strengthen college and university faculty's understanding of the reading and study skills support needed by students who are underprepared to read and comprehend complex text, think critically at the college level, and actively engage in the learning process. *Readers Matter™* is a pathway to: (a) inform faculty of their current practices in terms of supporting literacy in their content using text in meaningful ways that connect with instruction, (b) prepare faculty to support student learning using high-utility strategies that enhance comprehension, provide for active reading, and aid in retention of information, and (c) prepare faculty to help students transition from high school reading to college level complex text. The intent of this study was to develop and test the *Readers Matter™* rubric and answer the research questions:

1. Do the data collection instruments and processes provide enough information to score faculty in terms of their current practices for supporting and enhancing their students' literacy using the *Readers Matter™* rubric?
2. Does the *Readers Matter™* rubric include enough critical areas of literacy so that evaluators can make informed recommendations for faculty on ways to support student literacy?

3. Need for the Study

Students are exhibiting alarming inadequacies in their ability to effectively work with and learn from print-based materials. This is evidenced by their struggles in heavy reading courses at the university level and by their compensatory behaviors in said courses. As Hobson (2004) stated, it is the responsibility of the instructor to "make certain that assigned reading is course-related" as well as to teach "students the discipline-specific values and strategies that facilitate disciplinary learning" (p. 1). The idea of the incorporation of literacy supports into disciplines as faculty responsibility is echoed by Brown and Meuti (1999), claiming "college students develop the skills and attitudes that faculty encourage" (p. 164). *Readers Matter™* offers faculty not only an opportunity to undergo an evaluation to assess the level of this critical literacy support, but also to assist areas of need.

The existence of an individualized professional development for professors/instructors in the area of literacy support is potentially a highly effective answer to this ever-growing problem. Research indicates that for professional development to be meaningful, it needs to address teachers' individual needs and be participant and data-driven (Grossman, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). As students continue to move through the educational system successfully without possessing the necessary skills to achieve at the university level, not only are federal mandates failing to be served, but students' educational needs are also being neglected. Via this study, university teachers will be provided with the individual, constructive, critical feedback and recommendations that they need to ensure that their students are effectively utilizing print in their classrooms in ways that advance reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

4. Review of the Literature

4.1 Reading and College Success

Recent research indicates a steady and concerning decline in the compliance of reading assignments at the college level (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Clump, Bauer & Bradley, 2004). Students seem to be surviving in the classroom without the aid of text. In one study conducted by Connor–Greene (2000), 72% of the sample claimed that they rarely or never read the reading assignments before the due date.

Another study of two universities in the south reports even less compliance, finding between 78%-82% of students reported either reading the text sparingly or not at all (Sikorski et al., 2002). These data are consistent with the findings of Burchfield and Sappington's (2000) assertion that only approximately one in three students will come to class having read the assigned material. Simply put, the vast majority of students enter a classroom with little or no background knowledge of the material, yet navigate the course adequately having never read the textbook. This behavior appears to be a concerted and calculated effort on the part of the offending students. After all, as noted by Carkenord (1994), "Practical experience, however, indicates that most students do not read textbooks or journal articles as a result of their intrinsic desire to learn" (p. 164). Students are focused on getting good grades in a course instead of channeling their efforts into learning the material (Young, 2002). In an almost admirable fashion, students are observing the dynamics of each course and making efforts to conserve time, money, and effort by either selecting not to read the assigned text, or bolder still, never purchasing the book. When professors assign reading from a textbook or professional article, it is too often assigned without purpose or connection. If the appropriate compliance to reading assignments is not properly monitored, an involuntary message may be sent to students saying this particular aspect of learning is optional and not regulated by the professor (Burchfield & Sappington, 2002).

4.1.1 Literacy Essentials

To be successful in the college environment, it is vital that students have strong comprehension and vocabulary skills and strategies to navigate through dense and complex educational text. The assigned readings may be difficult to comprehend, but also may be assigned in large quantities, up to 200 pages per week (Caverly et al., 2004). This is not a task that can be approached with careless abandon either; Simpson and Nist (2000) reported that 85% of the assigned texts require what they refer to as careful reading. However, regardless of the daunting demands placed on students, the fact remains that many students simply choose not to complete the assigned reading for whatever reason. Even though students have experienced the necessary academic success in high school to be admitted into postsecondary education, it does not guarantee that they possess the comprehension and acquisition skills to navigate complex text (Taraban, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2000). However, content instructors can offer assistance to students by providing non-reading related information such as background knowledge, unique experiences, and other learning aides (Lei et al., 2010). Teachers can in fact provide scaffolded support by utilizing a variety of strategies and methods.

When it comes to acquiring new information, the most readily available resource is print. Especially in postsecondary education, the ability to learn valuable and novel information from print is vital. Whether the medium is a textbook, journal article, web page, primary document, thesis, or any of a number of other venues, reading fluently and with deep comprehension is necessary. To achieve this, students may need more support than instructors simply assigning a span of pages from the required course text (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2004). To begin with, students need to be engaged in the text (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Meltzer, 2002). Students who approach an assigned text with both an attitude and skill-set to complete the required reading will be reflective, responsive, and interactive with material (Meltzer, 2002). To help foster literary engagement, an environment of comfort and acceptance must be created to allow for dialogue, connections and collaboration (Guthrie, 2001). Classroom instructors are responsible for shaping this atmosphere of respect and trust.

5. *Professional Development*

In nearly every professional arena, employees must undergo mandatory continuing education of some sort to maintain familiarity with changing standards, as well as grow their foundation of knowledge and further develop their skill-sets. The academic field is no different, as faculty members from all levels attend seminars, workshops, professional learning communities, and conferences throughout each school year. These offerings come at a high cost to institutions; for instance, one study of expenditures in the 1990's revealed that public school districts spent an average of $200 per pupil on professional development (PD) per school year (Killeen, Monk, & Plecki, 2002). Unfortunately, many workshops are often met with disdain by participants. Agencies and individuals alike are constantly recreating content and delivery models to accommodate the ever-existing need for academic professional development. Many professional development sessions are conducted within the framework of the workshop model, in which participants attend seminars ranging from one hour to three days. Research is beginning to reject this method as being ineffective (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

In fact, some believe that truly meaningful professional development "cannot be prepackaged or conveyed by means of traditional top-down 'teacher training' strategies" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011, p. 81). Instead, inquiry based, participant-driven professional development has the potential to be most effective (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). In her article focused on improvement of professional development practices, Grossman (2009) indicates that most teachers do not find professional development particularly helpful because it fails to address their individual needs and lacks follow-up. She goes on to address the importance of collecting data on impact and perceived utility of strategies, as well as highlight that "Professional development should primarily meet the individual needs of teachers" (Grossman, 2009, p. 2). Rarely are professional development opportunities available that focus on the unique needs of teachers and provide the data to support effectiveness.

6. Research Methods and Procedures

The research design for this study was qualitative in nature. To accurately examine the necessary components of student literacy support in the classroom, a thorough understanding of the many aspects of instruction was vital. Assessment of classroom and teacher characteristics was conducted using surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Qualitative researchers are concerned with context because actions can best be understood when observed in the original setting. For this reason, classroom observations, a vital vehicle for the data collection in this study, occurred in the naturalistic environment.

6.1 Participants

The participants in this study met the definition of "criterion sampling" (Patton, 1990). Participants included five professors at the university representing various departments. These individuals, all of whom had been previously identified by the investigators as information rich stakeholders, teach courses on campus that fulfill general education requirements. Additionally, the targeted group of instructors had expressed interest in pedagogical supports by attending professional developments on campus and sought individual assistance through various other available campus resources. Each potential participant was contacted via email and given a description of the evaluative process and research project design along with the Informed Consent Document. These five professors comprised the testing group for the *Readers Matter™* assessment. The departments represented by each instructor are as follows: Psychology, Religious Studies, Physics, English, and Mathematics. All of the participants are tenured faculty at the university and have been teaching in postsecondary institutions ranging from eight to thirty-one years.

6.1.2 Instrument Development Procedures

A group of university faculty was assembled to assist in the collaborative development of the *Readers Matter™* assessment tool. This group totaled eight individuals, all of whom are professors or administrators at the university in which the study took place. These professors/administrators represent various departments across campus including Psychology, History, Exceptional Education, Biology, Literacy, and College Readiness. These experienced educators offered insight and advice, as well as research to aid in the development of the *Readers Matter™* evaluative process. It was necessary to utilize a variety of data collection methods to adequately grasp the breadth and depth of support provided throughout each course. These methods included participant self-report through the questionnaire and survey, a review of current documents available to students (syllabus, course documents, etc.), participant interview conducted by a *Readers Matter™* evaluator, and three classroom observations. Additionally, questions/prompts included in the interview protocol were specifically designed to target topics not easily addressed in the questionnaire and survey.

To guide the pre and post interviews with participants, an interview protocol was developed by the investigators and utilized when conducting the interviews. The questions included on this protocol are open-ended and designed to encourage dialogue from the interviewee. Additionally, these questions address components of the *Readers Matter™* evaluation that are not otherwise easily assessed. Open-ended questions allowed participants to express themselves freely and to add as much detail and contextualization as they desired. In addition to the interview, each participant completed an Instructor Survey and an Instructor Questionnaire. These documents targeted participants' attitudes toward classroom literacy support, opinions of their student's habits and abilities, and finally, to gather some additional demographic and background data. The Instructor Survey consists of 54-items, using a Likert scale (with seven qualifiers per item) and also includes open-ended prompts for a "relevant behavior/example" to allow further elaboration on each item. The items on the Instructor Survey address issues of student compliance with assignments, instructor perceptions of student abilities, and student behaviors.

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The Instructor Questionnaire is a simple, one-page document detailing the specific course structure, performance measures, attendance, and student success rates. The Instructor Questionnaire also asks for instructor demographics including years of experience in higher education and fields of expertise. Each document was emailed to participants and returned either electronically or in hard copy. Classroom observations were provided by three evaluators who documented descriptive fieldnotes. Two of the evaluators were Ph.D level faculty members and the other, a School Psychologist intern. Evaluators acting as field observers were given minimal structure and direction regarding the quantity and content of the fieldnotes. Instead, part of this research project was to discern qualities within the types of notes, depth of detail, and structure of the notes that proved to be most informative in terms of the *Readers Matter™* rubric. Participants were observed a minimum of three times from February through mid-April.

Finally, the preliminary *Readers Matter™* rubric was used by each investigator when finalizing the assessment process. The *Readers Matter™* rubric is a seventy-six item scale that combines the established characteristics of highly effective teaching and learning with the research-based practices of embedded literacy support. A tested, refined version of the rubric will guide evaluators in decision making toward eventual *Readers Matter™* certification, as well as inform in terms of specific strengths and weaknesses within course structure and/or instructor practices. However, for the purposes of this study, the rubric simply establishes a framework from which to begin the process of improvement and alteration to an eventual final evaluative tool.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Readers Matter™ Rubric

A vital mechanism of the *Readers Matter™* evaluative process, the rubric provided evaluators with a consistent, objective method of recording the observed instances of necessary components in a condensed document that is representative of all collected data. The rubric was composed of 76 items that were scored as either being "observed" or "not observed" by each evaluator. When all rubrics were scored for each of the five participants by each of the three evaluators, each rubric line item had the opportunity to be identified as many as 15 times. It is important to closely examine the occurrences of each item to gauge its relevance and utility of the data collection procedures. Intuitively, if items were identified or "observed" often by evaluators, the data collection methods were effective in recognizing the existence of said items.

As the purpose of this pilot study was to create and refine the *Readers Matter™* evaluative process, evaluators first needed to know the rubric items in which they could be most confident in keeping, as well as those that may be most affected by revisions to data collection procedures. Assigning cutoff scores in each direction to identify such items was a logical way to narrow the evaluator's focus down from the 76 item rubric total. An analysis of the *Readers Matter™* rubric scoring indicated that 14 of the 76 items were identified quite regularly, in at least 13 of 15 opportunities. Table 1 specifies the item number, general idea, and the number of times the item was "observed" most often by evaluators. Because these items were so consistently identified, developers can be confident that they are not only being exhibited in the classroom, but that the data collection procedures are offering adequate information for evaluators to efficiently recognize each occurrence.

However, the equally important alternatives are cases in which items were "not observed" a great number of times across evaluators and participants. If a rubric item was only "observed" on five or less occasions of the possible 15, three explanations can be inferred: 1) the rubric criterion is not exhibited by the instructor; 2) the data collection procedures that are currently in place did not effectively identify the existence of the criterion; or 3) the data collection procedures gathered the necessary information for the item to be "observed" and the evaluators failed to recognize it. Whatever the rationale for an item being rarely identified; it is valuable information on which developers focused their attention. Table 2 specifies the item number, general idea, and the amount of times items were "observed" fewest times by evaluators.

Finally, it is important to analyze the inter-rater reliability among evaluators to better understand the consistency in which the rubrics were scored. To obtain statistical representations of this uniformity, multiple calculations were necessary. Rather than examining the inter-rater reliability among all three evaluators collectively, pairwise comparisons were made between each possible grouping of two evaluators. For example, evaluator one was paired with evaluator two, then with evaluator three, and finally evaluator two was paired with evaluator three. All items on every scored rubric for each of the five participants were tallied. Then, all possible pairwise comparisons were made, yielding results in terms of percent agreement and Cohen's Kappa.

Table 3 details the results of all possible pairwise comparisons for each of the three evaluators on all five participants (using pseudonyms) in terms of total percent agreement and Cohen's Kappa. According to Altman (1991), results of pairwise comparisons yielding a Kappa correlation coefficient of:

- less than 0.20 = poor agreement
- 0.20 to 0.40 = fair agreement
- 0.40 to 0.60 = moderate agreement
- 0.60 to 0.80 = good agreement
- 0.80 to 1.00 = very good agreement

As delineated in Table 3, ten of the 15 pairwise comparisons exhibited moderate agreement, while one is classified as having good agreement, and four pairs demonstrated fair to poor agreement.

It is necessary to know both the specific rubric item as well as the broad category of practices that were scored as "not observed" by all three evaluators. As previously discussed, these practices may be present within a course, but failed to be identified using the present data collection procedures. However, identification of these items must be conducted to determine appropriate recommendations to instructors.

Overall, the data collection procedures utilized for this study that proved to be the most efficient in collecting adequate and relevant data for use in scoring the *Readers Matter™* rubric were the fieldnotes from classroom observations, the course syllabi, and the instructor interview. While the instructor survey and questionnaire provided valuable insight into the course structure and student behaviors, the results did not prove to be particularly useful in scoring many individual rubric items.

8. Implications

After all data were collected and each participant's course was scored using the *Readers Matter™* rubric, analyses were conducted to assess the utility of each data collection procedure, as well as to determine if the data collection instruments and processes provide enough information to rate faculty's support of their students' literacy using the *Readers Matter™* rubric and if enough data were collected to inform evaluators toward recommendations for faculty. The purpose of this study was to create an evaluative process that yields information regarding the student literacy supports embedded into college courses. However, the implications from the development and existence of such a structure are much further reaching.

A key component to the potential success of the *Readers Matter™* individualized PD model is that faculty members willingly elect to undergo the evaluation and receive any constructive feedback. Simply working with educators that desire the assistance is a critical first step not experienced by many PD providers. When that professional vulnerability is combined with an in-depth evaluation that uniquely targets the individual practices of an instructor, the potential for meaningful change in educational delivery over time is exponentially greater than the typical PD model. The *Readers Matter™* rubric aids evaluators in focusing their efforts in supporting the development of participating faculty on specific practices that are research-based and proven to be highly effective. A supportive and individualized PD model such as this addresses many of the structural inadequacies of other popular PD models. While it is now known that some data collection procedures provide more pertinent information than others and that the *Readers Matter™* rubric yields an illustrative picture of strengths and inadequacies within a course, there is work yet to be done. As previously described, when a rubric item is scored as "not observed," it is unclear if the instructor is failing to implement the practice or if the evidence of said practice was simply not collected.

To more accurately tease out this crucial distinction, more thorough and pointed data collection procedures must be in place. This could be accomplished by the creation of new methods or by expanding the scope and focus of existing procedures. One likely manifestation of new methods is to obtain the permission of instructors to access their course materials. Many courses utilize an electronic course management system such as BlackBoard to store syllabi, course documents, and assignments. Allowing evaluators access to only these instructional pieces (there is no need to view any student data) would be a source of rich information that could play a vital role in identifying the presence of *Readers Matter™* rubric items. Additionally, the advent of a flexible post-interview protocol would be of value. After mining all collected data to score the *Readers Matter™* rubric, if evaluators had the opportunity to ask direct questions of the instructor to provide further insight or clarity into specific practices and instructional strategies, otherwise overlooked items may be accurately scored as "observed."

This would also serve as an appropriate time to commend instructors on exemplary practices observed throughout the evaluative process.

9. Conclusions

This study was conducted to develop the *Readers Matter™* evaluative process and to identify areas in need of refinement. Educators who elect to undergo the *Readers Matter™* evaluation receive individualized professional development in the area of student literacy support. The assistance provided is targeted to the unique needs of instructors who desire to increase their impact on producing more educated and literate students. While this model contains areas that are in need of expansion and enhancement, the structure that is now in place provides the framework for a promising alternative to popular professional development.

10. Tables

10.1 Table 1

Items Most Often Observed – Readers Matter™ Rubric

Rubric Item #	Observed Instances
1. Active participation…	15
2. Safe environment…	15
23. Learning opportunities…	15
42. Name of text…	15
10. Multiple methods for data…	14
7. Hands-on experiences…	13
22. Orchestrates discussions…	13
25. Integrates learning resources…	13
30. Links concepts to prior experiences…	13
36. In-depth knowledge of content…	13
41. Repertoire of strategies…	13
52. Thinking like an expert…	13
57. Opportunities to communicate…	13
76. Complete writing/oral presentation…	13

10.1.2 Table 2

Items Least Often Observed – Readers Matter™ Rubric

Rubric Item #	Observed Instances
3. Values diversity…	5
11. Consult colleagues to improve instruction…	5
34. Teacher collaboration…	4
63. Student comprehension mistakes…	4
68. Instructor implements debit system…	4
69. Instructor implements reading assignments…	4
71. Reading advances core content…	4
72. Classes structured around print…	4
44. Reading listed by page number…	3
47. Services/assistance to help students with text…	3
49. Determine student background knowledge	3
53. How to take notes while reading…	3
54. Self-check exercises to test own reading…	3
58. Time for discussion of reading assignment…	3
12. Revises strategies based on data	2
14. Co-develops guides with students…	2
15. Students use rubrics to self-assess	2
33. 21st century learning skills incorporated	2

38. Incorporates state and national standards	2
48. Introduces textbook	2
66. Asks for feedback on text difficulty	2
20. Differentiated state and national standards	1
50. Listing of key vocabulary	1
60. Matches readers to text difficulty	1
64. Print materials at appropriate levels	1

Table 3: Pairwise Comparison Agreements Between Raters – Readers Matter™ rubric

Instructor	Raters	Percent Agreement	Cohen's Kappa
Bird	1&2*	76.32%	0.525
	1&3	72.37%	0.442
	2&3	72.37%	0.419
May	1&2	67.11%	0.364
	1&3	80.26%	0.603
	2&3*	73.68%	0.481
Mullins	1&2	78.95%	0.579
	1&3*	71.05%	0.421
	2&3	71.05%	0.418
Perkins	1&2*	72.37%	0.446
	1&3	68.42%	0.362
	2&3	72.37%	0.423
Smith	1&2	78.95%	0.567
	1&3	56.58%	0.241
	2&3*	56.58%	0.160

*Conducted classroom observations

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