Reading Anxiety in College Level Developmental Reading Students

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ABSTRACT

Reading anxiety is an emotion that many college level developmental readers experience while in a reading classroom. However, little research exists on why this emotion occurs or how to alleviate it. Being aware of the impact of reading anxiety, as well as how to assist students who experience it, is imperative. This article provides a brief background on reading anxiety, the importance of understanding this emotion in a classroom, and practical strategies to help college developmental readers cope with reading anxiety. Readers will take away an appreciation of what numerous developmental students experience as well as ways in which instructors can begin to work with their students to move them beyond this academic hurdle.

"I enjoy reading; I just don't feel that I am very good at it."

"I'm okay with my reading skills thus far. I'm just shy when it comes to reading aloud."

"I have extreme reading anxiety; you'll see."

These are statements college level developmental reading students express in regards to their experiences and feelings regarding reading. Unfortunately, as the amount of students enrolling in developmental programs continues to increase, many students who enter into a developmental reading course voice similar sentiments. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2014), 7.7 million community college students across the country enrolled in Fall 2012 (including part time and full time). Nearly half of the students who enroll in community colleges are in need of developmental education (Gallard, Albritton, & Morgan, 2010; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Therefore, approximately 3.5 million American students may need developmental education. This increase in enrollment and developmental need will likely contribute to rising numbers of students echoing these statements above.

Along with the large amount of students needing developmental education, Crawford and Fountain (1995) discovered anxiety is one of the most common barriers that stands in the way of progress in education of adult learners. Taking into consideration that anxiety creates such a large barrier, this is an area that needs to be addressed within the classroom. The purpose of this article is to explain reading anxiety as well as address

factors that enhance student reading anxiety, describe the goal of developmental reading programs, and to offer practical suggestions on alleviating student reading anxiety for developmental reading students.

Factors that may Enhance Anxiety

Crawford and Fountain (1995) describe reading anxiety as general anxiety, specifically invested in the reading process. The fact that students may experience reading anxiety to some degree as they enter college can prove to be problematic. Students who feel as if they are not satisfactory readers may not envision themselves being successful in college courses. This, in turn, may result in lack of motivation, dedication or effort. Additionally, there are students in developmental reading classes who, "generally do not consider themselves readers and do not enjoy reading in most contexts" (Paulson, 2006, p. 56). If students do not view themselves as readers, they will be less likely to participate or take an active role in their reading education (Armstrong & Newman, 2001). Givens (2010) explains that developmental students often feel discouraged when placed in developmental courses and even view these courses as a waste of time. Caverly, Nicholson and Radcliffe (2004) state further that in some cases developmental students can be resentful or feel stigmatized. These issues may intensify the anxiety that students already feel as they enter the developmental reading classroom. In order to improve in these self-perceptions, it is necessary to understand the purpose of these programs.

Purpose of Developmental Reading Programs

Developmental level courses are intended to support students to learn subject matter in order to advance a career, read textbooks, and know how to study and remember their content (Piepmeier, 1987). Many students do not arrive at college with these skills, and are thus enrolled in developmental reading programs. In fact, many students in the developmental program could be described as aliterate as defined by Morris and Price (2008); that is, a student who knows how to read, but chooses not to or reads only enough to get by. Furthermore, when students arrive with reading anxiety, this resistance can be heightened. The anxiety students experience can deter students from further reading and improving upon necessary skills.

Often developmental reading students do not understand the role and importance of reading (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney & Herschbach, 2010; Morris & Price, 2008). When students begin to understand that reading has a place in all facets of life, it becomes more of a priority in their learning. Paulson (2006) believes that the goals of developmental reading programs should be "providing a foundation for life-long reading" as well as "instilling in developmental reading students the belief that reading has intrinsic value" (p.52). Developmental programs that support readers' understanding and encourage valuing reading as a skill will be instrumental to their educational and career goals. Allowing developmental readers multiple opportunities to hold reading in a higher esteem should make it a more meaningful part of their academic and professional intentions. Reading anxiety can impede these reading goals, though having strong reading skills is essential to achievement for any college student. Therefore, understanding anxiety and how to help students alleviate this emotion can help students and teachers alike to focus on the goals of developmental reading programs rather than the obstacle that reading anxiety can create.

Anxiety in the Reading Process

A large impediment to the reading process is reading anxiety. According to Crawford and Fountain (1995), "Fear and anxiety are the two most common barriers to the advancement of education in adult learners"

(p.46). In developmental reading courses, reading anxiety is an issue for many students as they begin their coursework towards their career goals. Reading anxiety is general anxiety invested in the oral or silent reading process (Crawford & Fountain, 1995). Though this is an acknowledged condition in the reading classroom (Crawford & Fountain, 1995; Grills-Taqeuchel, Fletcher, Vaughn & Stuebing, 2012), little research has been conducted in this area. If developmental students are to succeed, the issue of reading anxiety needs to be examined in order for students to be able to overcome and achieve academic and vocational success, especially in courses that require an abundant amount of reading. If more research is done focusing on reading anxiety, developmental reading teachers will have more resources to pull from when considering strategies to help students succeed who experience reading anxiety.

Many developmental students come into the developmental reading programs with anxiety, low motivation levels, or with a poor attitude towards reading (Caverly, Nicholson & Radcliffe, 2004; Givens, 2010; Paulson, 2006; Willingham & Price, 2009). This may impact the way in which they view reading or add to any negative feelings that they bring with them into their college experience. An additional barrier to their achievement is if students cannot view the relevance of the reading and learning that is taking place in their developmental reading course. This added barrier can further enhance anxiety and frustration towards the class or reading in general.

It is also important to note that developmental students and their instructors may not always have the same goals. Given the competing demands of work, families, social events, personal problems, and other courses, these competing goals add to the challenges faced by both instructors and students in developmental reading courses. In addition, these competing goals can contribute to their building anxiety for those students already struggling. Due to all of these

considerations, it is imperative that instructors build their awareness of reading anxiety and learn strategies to help students with this issue.

Why is This Important and What Can Educators Do?

A popular belief in college settings is that adults come into college level courses with the ability to read and comprehend academic texts and that American colleges and universities are filled with students who are all fully prepared to read college textbooks, write college-level essays, think critically, and reason accurately (Boylan & Bonham, 2011). Yet, this is not necessarily the case. According to Bradley and Thalgott (1987), reading anxiety is a cycle: repeated failure causes anxiety which reinforces avoidance. This avoidance reduces practice which worsens the feelings of failure. While this cycle usually begins in childhood, it continues into adulthood. Many developmental reading students come into their developmental reading classroom having already experienced this cycle of failure; thus immediately creating an obstacle students and instructors have to work to overcome.

Practices in the Classroom

Knowing that reading anxiety exists and has a significant impact on a developmental reader's success, there are strategies that can be utilized in the classroom to overcome this emotion. Some of these strategies are simple to employ in the classroom, while others may take time outside of the classroom. The remainder of this article will discuss strategies for students who experience reading anxiety that will enhance students' learning in their developmental reading course and prepare them for their college level and career-specific courses.

Reading surveys. In many classrooms, students are expected to participate by reading portions of text both aloud and silently. At the beginning of the semester a teacher can

distribute a reading survey that helps identify anyone who might experience reading anxiety when reading (see Appendix A). Based on their responses, strategies can be utilized to assist those who experience reading anxiety. Teachers will need to navigate particular cases in order to ensure that this is not to be used as an excuse for some students to participate while others do not; rather a tool to allow insight on who will need more support.

Oral reading. Before beginning each class, it could be beneficial to know what sections of text will be read aloud. In developmental classrooms, a variety of silent reading, student oral reading and teacher reading is beneficial as students will be expected to comprehend and be comfortable with these modes of reading in their college level courses as well. Mellard, Fall and Woods (2013) further stated that oral reading fluency in adults may lead to increased reading achievement. Students who have self-identified reading anxiety can be informed what will be read aloud each day. These students should be allowed to know in advance the text (sentence, paragraph, page, etc.) that they will be asked to read orally during that day's class time. This allows a student to read over the text before being called to do so in a public manner. As Rasinski (2010) stated, "With each practice reading of the passage, the students read with greater accuracy, speed, and comprehension. This, of course, is expected; you get better at what you practice" (p. 89). Having students practice their text before class allows them to grow comfortable with the text, and potentially reduces the anxiety they might experience when they are asked to read aloud during class time. As the semester progresses, reliance on this strategy will support students in developing confidence and independence with their reading. Additionally, if done early on in the semester, it does a great deal to boost confidence as well as build trust in their instructor.

Mini conferences. An additional strategy that can be utilized is mini conferences or check-ins throughout the semester. Before or after class, or through e-mail, teachers can stay current with students' thoughts, feelings and anxiety levels on any reading, both while they are in class as well as while at home or in other courses. Conferences allow students to reveal their thinking and reading processes to their instructors (Porath, 2014). Though this sounds simple, it is so important to connect with those readers who are struggling, to identify reading skills which still need to be developed, and to understand any anxiety about the reading process which might impede success. In this way, it could be understood, to an extent, how students are feeling, and how an instructor might be able to assist them with strengthening their areas of need.

Ultimately, knowing and connecting with students is one of the greatest tools that a teacher can have at his/her disposal. As Noddings (2009) discussed, it is important for students to be able to read and comprehend well. But, it is just as important to care and attend to students' emotional and social needs. Being aware and respecting student reading anxiety is a first step in helping students to overcome this barrier in order to succeed in their reading and ultimately in their careers.

Self-reflection. One suggestion that could be made to students who experience reading anxiety is to document it as it is happening. This might include stopping while listening to a class lecture or while reading in order to recognize when anxious emotions begin. The student then needs to stop and write down their feelings and their analysis of why they believe it is occurring. Through this process, students can start to reflect on when anxiety appears and notice if there is a pattern. If students can identify certain situations that provoke their anxiety, educators might be able to work together to help push through those instances. When students are aware of their emotions while reading, they can also become more in tune with their individual thinking process while reading.

Reading for pleasure. Though some students are reluctant readers, it is recommended that they read for pleasure on their own time. Many will admit they hardly read their assignments that are required, let alone read during their free time. However, the more reading a student does, the more fluency and vocabulary can be enhanced and confidence can grow (Willinghm & Price, 2009). If students challenge themselves to read more, it is helpful to spend time talking with them about what they are reading and what approach they are using. This, in turn, often allows them to be more comfortable reading both in and out of class for personal and academic purposes.

Conclusion and Future Research Suggestions

Reading anxiety can deeply impact the way students feel about themselves as readers and can have an impact on the ways they perform and succeed in their courses. Utilizing strategies to alleviate the anxiety students feel, as well as respecting and appreciating the work and emotions that they experience while in a developmental reading classroom, are important steps to ensure success both in and outside of the classroom.

These are just suggestions, as there is little research on anxiety in developmental reading classrooms. The role of anxiety, however, has been researched in other content areas with students in higher education. Scholars in the area of writing (Holland, 2013), communication (Hunter, Westwick & Haleta, 2014), and math (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007) have investigated the impacts that a specific invested anxiety has on the classroom performance of developmental students. However, according to Crawford and Fountain (1995) the research exploring reading anxiety with the developmental reader is notably missing. This remains true today. Furthermore, even less research exists on how students experience reading anxiety and how educators can help.

Future research should focus on observing and speaking with developmental reading students who experience reading anxiety throughout the course of a semester to determine the extent to which the mentioned strategies alleviate their reading anxiety. Researching this aspect of the reading experience can greatly benefit both the students who struggle with reading anxiety and those educators whose charge it is to help their students become successful readers.

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Appendix A

These are example questions from which students can respond to at the beginning of each semester.

1. Describe your general thoughts and experiences regarding reading.
2. When you are asked to read aloud in front of a class, how do you feel?
3. What experiences have you had with reading – oral or silent, positive or negative – that have helped to shape your current thoughts and feelings towards reading?
4. Are you better able to understand text when you read it silently, orally, or when someone reads it to you?
5. What do you feel you need to work on most in regards to your reading?
6. What can teachers do to alleviate reading anxiety?
7. How do you attempt to lessen your reading anxiety?
8. How do classmates impact the reading anxiety you might feel?