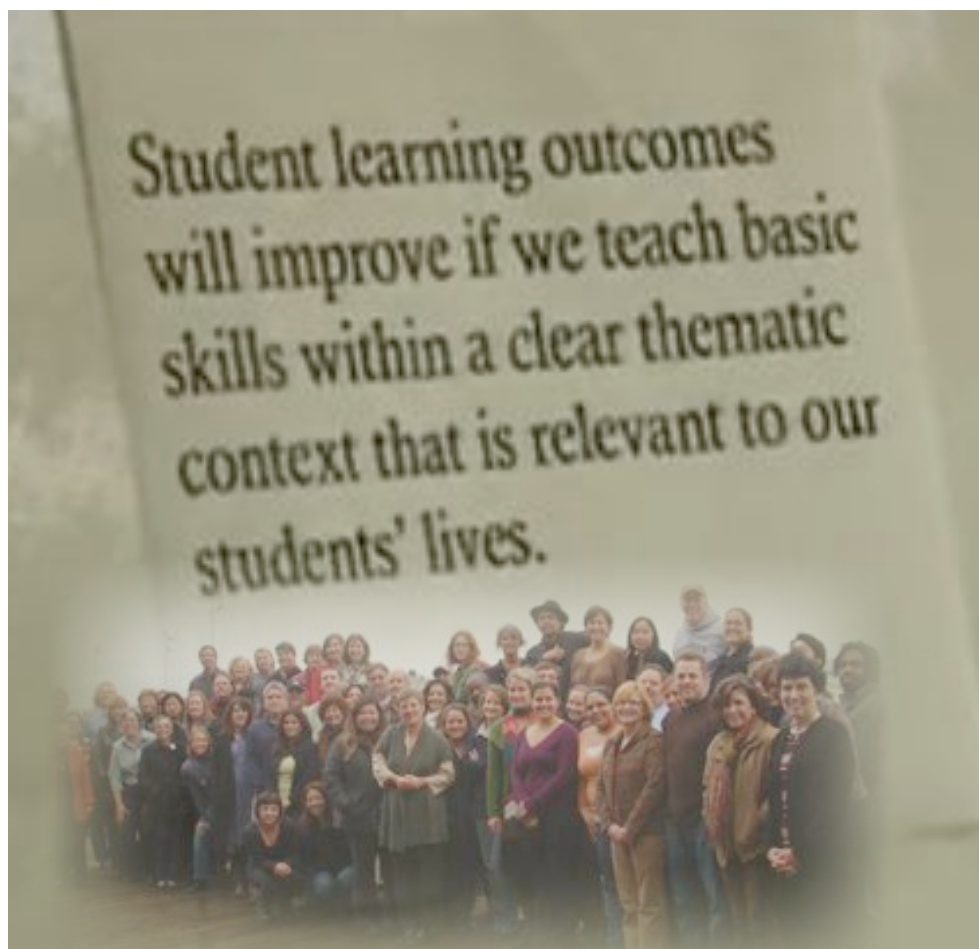




BASIC SKILLS
IN COMPLEX
CONTEXTS



A New Way to Think about Basic Skills

Toward a Liberatory Vision of Basic Skills Education

(Excerpted from original FIN Proposal to The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation)

We begin with a moral position about learning as a liberatory act, a move toward freedom. This perspective is essential to basic skills education, because it responds to the lives of so many of our students—underclass, working class, at risk, high risk, proximate to violence both real and virtual, stymied by mass culture, under-literate and semesters or years away from academic success. Liberatory higher education intentionally aims at freedom, the terrible kind of democratic freedom that recognizes complexity, obfuscation and responsibility; that wonderful kind of freedom suggested by James Baldwin, which articulates the reality around us, and within us, so that we are not “submerged” by it.¹

Our current basic skills paradigm gets in the way of seeing our students clearly and engaging these adult learners where they are. We give them bite-sized curricula. We separate discrete skills (paragraph writing, using a ruler, grammar skill and drill) from the kind of motivating, engaging intellectual work that higher education is about. We see our students as deficient

for not already knowing this stuff, and we either pity them or think they are not cut out for higher education. We try to keep them segregated in certain hallways—English, math, ESL, counseling—until they are “fixed” and “ready” for a true college education.

What this approach obscures are the tremendous capacities our students bring to the classroom—their ability to analyze, to problem-solve, to use creative thinking to synthesize information, to grapple with big ideas. We focus narrowly on their deficits—their inexperience with academic language and culture, their lack of background knowledge—and then design our “basic skills” classrooms and assignments in ways that don’t elicit their fullest capacities. Or, we tolerate them in our regular classrooms without adjusting our teaching practice to give students access to the kinds of “basic” language, habits, and cognitive routines we take for granted as masters of the disciplines we teach.

In the process, huge numbers of students fail or withdraw. They came to community college not just with underdeveloped skills and poor habits, but often with fraught educational histories and precarious academic identities. And they can only withstand failure and disaffection in our institutions for so long, when meanwhile they need to make money and progress like everybody else in the middle class. They also can’t sustain an

engagement with learning when their pain or anxiety or misinformed expectations repeatedly knock them out of the learning experience.

A liberatory approach to basic skills education demands that we come up with new ways of seeing our students, new language about basic skills education, and new ways of imagining the learning environments of our classrooms.

¹ Baldwin, James. “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” *New York Times*. 29 July 1979.

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HEWLETT
FOUNDATION

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Basic Skills Innovation

Contextualized Education

There's some exciting work going on with contextualized teaching and learning in the Faculty Inquiry Network (FIN). A large focus of that work has to do with student literacy.



College of Alameda Diesel Mechanics Department is doing some interesting things around reading. Scott Albright, Diesel Mechanics Instructor, decided that he needed to get his students to read more about fuel injection and other important topics. He realized that the students were reading, but they weren't reading the textbook, so Scott changed direction. He asked his students to make their own choices about

reading materials, e.g., magazine articles, the internet, and other resources, to research a topic that would be discussed at the next lecture. He found that the students not only read their favorite sources but then referred to the textbook to backfill what the casual reading didn't provide. That's exactly what Scott wanted them to do. Since he changed his approach to class readings, he's found that the students are more engaged in class discussions, more prepared for the lab projects, and the biggest surprise is that their test scores went up on average by 30% over last semester. Impressive. These results have also made Scott a happier, more engaged teacher.

At Los Angeles Trade Tech College, instructors are integrating soft skills into the construction program. The students enrolled in this program are trying to overcome huge barriers to success as they meet the challenges of rejoining society after having been incarcerated or experienced other difficult challenges. Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin and Maryanne Galindo use a technique they developed called "3D Storytelling" to help students name and describe their life challenges and help them to create brighter horizons for themselves. The classroom environment is filled with mutual respect, a strong sense of purpose, and clearly defined goals for each student. It is easy to see that this format for contextualizing soft skills is very rewarding for the students and the instructors.



The Carpenteria Fina project at Laney College is a bilingual cabinetmaking program where ESL instructors share classroom time during lab hours. The instructors use techniques that elicit student engagement in class discussions. Getting students to speak in class is always harder with limited English speakers. The instructors, Sonja Franeta (ESL Instructor) and Myron Franklin (Cabinet Making Instructor), decided to audiotape the students' verbal descriptions of the steps they were taking as they worked on their projects. The taping made learning visible for the instructors and helped

them better address what students need. By gaining the students' trust, the instructors were able to identify what was needed and adjust their lessons and techniques. The word about great student support got out to the community and now the instructors' new challenge is to keep up with the growing number of students who want to enroll in the program.

We aim to overcome three barriers that limit the effectiveness of many professional development programs:

1. Isolation of Teaching: Classroom as a Private Space.

One of the impediments to educational improvement is that the classroom has been treated as a private space, a space as Lee Shulman has called it, of "pedagogical solitude" (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching). As a consequence, faculty have few models to draw on and few opportunities to see alternative approaches across diverse settings. It is difficult to improve teaching when faculty remain isolated from one another and lack a clear idea of what excellent teaching looks like in various contexts.

Making the invisible work of faculty visible is a critical piece that is often missing from professional development efforts.

2. Insufficiency of Stand-alone Workshop Format.

As noted in the Basic Skills Initiative's literature review, there is little evidence that "one-shot" workshops produce any change in pedagogical practice, and yet workshops are still the most common form of staff development offered by community colleges. **To deeply impact teaching and learning, community college personnel must have time to question and reflect** together, examine data, share ideas and address problems. Community college educators need extensive, sustained opportunities to investigate what works in basic skills and what does not. College-wide cultural change is a complex endeavor that does not happen through workshops alone.

3. Basic Skills Are Not So Basic Or Simple.

The apparent simplicity of the basic skills in question often provokes a simplistic, sequential approach to pedagogy, one that emphasizes repetition, drill and memorization despite contrary research about how adults learn. While repetition and practice are important, "skill and drill" without a connection to big ideas can frustrate students and teachers alike. This project takes the perspective that even at the most fundamental levels of ESL, English and mathematics, intellectually engaging issues exist which students are fully capable of exploring. More to the point, current research on literacy suggests that these so-called **"basic skills" are not so basic or simple**. For example, the reading process that most of us take for granted is highly complex. As we "decode" a text, we bring to bear a vast reservoir of cultural and linguistic knowledge, connecting new ideas to old ones and actively questioning what we read as we read it. Too often, our discussions gloss over the complexities involved in teaching and learning basic skills.



increased the number of accelerated sections they offer, and at Chabot, significantly more students now take this course instead of the two-semester path. Of particular note: Chabot's African-American and Latino students have much higher persistence and success rates in the accelerated course than when they enroll in the two-semester path.

A similar approach is also being piloted in Math at Los Medanos College. FIN Inquiry Coach Myra Snell has developed an

wondered, did the topics covered during the long Math sequence truly qualify as "prerequisite"? Could we justify requiring all students to enroll in this long course sequence, especially when we lose so many along the way?

Second, Snell came face-to-face with what she calls the "multiplication problem." Imagine you have 100 students who start the Math curriculum three levels below college Math. Then, imagine (optimistically) that you have success and persistence rates of 75% all the way through the sequence so that 75% pass the first course and, of those, 75% choose to enroll in the next course and so on.

Doing the math leaves only 13 of those original 100 students successfully passing college-level Math. The bottom line: the multiplication rule means that for every layer of the curriculum you add, you dramatically reduce the number of students who get to the end of the sequence.

"I realized that increasing success and persistence were never going to be enough," says Snell. "We need to actually cut down the number of courses in the developmental sequence."

experimental, one-semester course that bypasses the standard 3-4 semester pre-college Math sequence. Her approach has been to "design backwards" from college Statistics, creating a developmental course that includes only skills and knowledge areas that are directly foundational to Statistics.

Snell's experiment emerged from two related observations. First, she was troubled that much of the developmental Math sequence is about preparing students for Calculus, a path pursued by fewer than 15% of Los Medanos students who complete Intermediate Algebra. To what extent, Snell

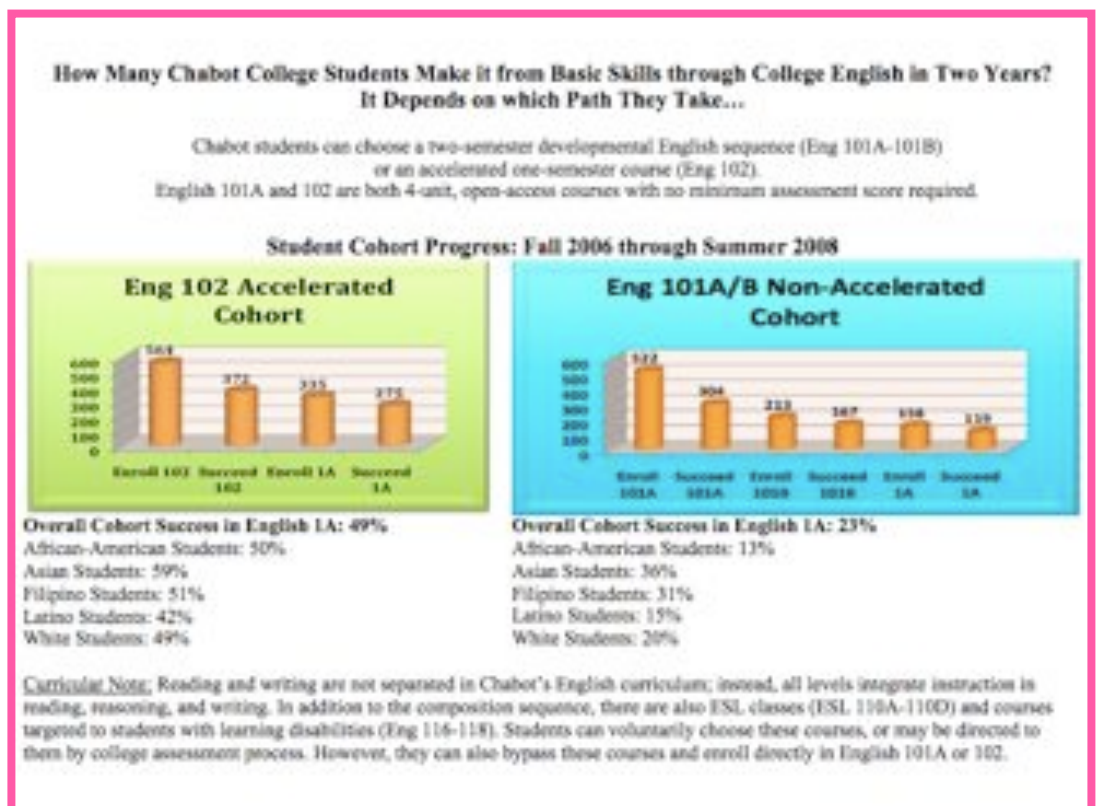
Basic Skills Innovation

Accelerating Academic Development: How Many Levels of Pre-College Courses Do Students Really Need?

A pervasive problem across community colleges is the high rate of attrition among students placing into pre-collegiate coursework. The more levels of these courses a student must go through, the less likely that student is to ever complete college English or Math. This issue is at the center of several Inquiry projects underway in FIN.

"It takes too long for students to go through the levels," says ESL Instructor Sonja Franeta. Franeta teaches in Laney College's Carpenteria Fina, a program in which Spanish-speakers develop English-language skills inside the context of a woodworking program, instead of in the multiple levels of a separate ESL sequence. Says Franeta, "I think the student actually learns more rapidly than we think."

At Chabot and Las Positas colleges, the problem is being addressed through accelerated English classes where instruction in reading and writing is integrated and where successful students move into College English in one semester. Despite the absence of minimum placement scores, students from the accelerated class are more than twice as likely to persist into and pass College English than students who choose the two-semester sequence. Because of these strong outcomes, both colleges have



Faculty Inquiry Teams that incorporate student co-inquirers into their Inquiry

College of Alameda

Berkeley City College

Cerritos College

Fresno City College

Laney College

Las Positas Community College

Los Angeles Trade Technical College

Los Medanos College

Mt. San Antonio College

San Diego Mesa College

Santa Ana College

Santa Barbara College

College of the Siskiyous

Students Teaching Teachers about Learning

Students as Focus of Inquiry

“People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?)”

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

Institutional data tells us part of the story of low success and persistence rates in basic skills Math and English for students across the state. To gain further perspective, faculty from the Umoja Community, in the context of the Faculty Inquiry Network, are strategically collecting student work and voices in basic skills Math classrooms to try to document and understand the relationship between the affective and cognitive domains

pertaining to student success. Many kinds of data—interviews, think-alouds, student work, videos of classroom



sessions, and journals—are collected by the Umoja instructors. Over the course of the semester, faculty watch, analyze and discuss this data with an eye towards uncovering the implications of these inputs on classroom practices and learning environments.

Inquiry shines light on Equity

This work is grappling with the intersection between the affective and cognitive domains of learning. There is strong evidence that if we engage students—in this case African American students—on interpersonal, emotional, and cultural levels, that they persist and succeed at higher rates. An Inquiry approach to professional development resists jumping to conclusions or solutions, yet it seeks insight and improvement regarding student learning; moving through this cycle is a vital part of the Umoja faculty’s work. Equity as a goal is not very helpful when you shrink it down to the classroom, but creating a classroom environment and teaching practices that open up students to the learning experience, particularly when they are defensive and closed off to it, is improving outcomes.

Tapping the Power of Student Co-inquirers

Engaging student voices as our focus of Inquiry may seem obvious. After all, if we want to know what our students are thinking about their education, it makes sense to ask them. What may seem less obvious, however, is the idea that students have a role to play as co-inquirers.

There are good reasons to invite student co-inquirers into our Inquiry work:

- ✚ They know things we may not know—or not remember!—about being a student, about the complex worlds they navigate, about how education is perceived by their peers.
- ✚ They offer a fresh perspective about age-old issues around education.
- ✚ They are not afraid to employ the technology needed for doing Making Visible work—cameras, editing software, multimedia platforms.

There are many ways to integrate students as co-inquirers in your team’s Inquiry. They can:

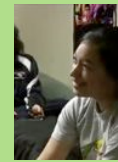
- ✚ Generate questions and theses in your area of Inquiry.
- ✚ Interview Students Faculty, Counselors, Administrative personnel, etc.
- ✚ Administer assessments; collect data; conduct research; read relevant literature about your Inquiry.
- ✚ Take part in your team’s meetings, where their contributions to the evolving Inquiry can be made.
- ✚ Help you problem solve, for example, a data dilemma your Inquiry has uncovered.
- ✚ Help out—or take the lead—in all phases of Making Visible;

Don’t be afraid to turn them loose. Part of the real power of using student co-inquirers is that if you give them freedom, they will surprise you with their creativity and initiative.

Why We Emphasize the Value of a Student Teacher Partnership

Students are on the ground level.

“When first encouraged by the FIN staff to work with students on this project, it seemed to be a logical, if not difficult, choice. **Students** who



live and breathe the **lessons** that **we**

teach, or attempt to teach, should be both the subjects of our research and our co-pilots.” (Berkeley City College)

Students help link academia to creativity.

Let’s be honest, teachers have busy schedules. And after getting involved in a project like FIN, the amount of **time** left in the day **dwindles** even further. Of course,



one of the greatest benefits of having a student Co-inquirer is the **student perspective** they **bring** to the table. Another enormous plus is the **excitement** students have about learning some of the **creative methods** used to share out the team’s project. Today’s students are familiar with projects like building a website or creating videos—and if not **they are willing to learn**.

You can find information about FIN teams and other interesting materials on our website.

www.fincommons.net

1. The FIN **website allows** teams and others a window into the Inquiry work of those inside the network.
2. The website is also used to give the network **insight** on the previous work members have done.
3. The website has been **valuable** for FIN leadership when sharing articles or research that pertains to basic skills.
4. The website also functions as a space where teams can receive **feedback** from their peers about their inquiries.
5. FIN leadership believes it is important to make the work of FIN teams visible. With the **help** of the web and video posting, teams share multimedia projects that express and explore their process.

The Techie Side of FIN

Lights, Camera, Inquiry!

FIN is continuing the use of an affective data collection tool developed by one of its members while under the SPECC grant—video data collection and analysis. Sean McFarland, the Making Visible Coordinator on the FIN Leadership team, is also the director of a student co-inquirer team that produces video documentaries such as *Reading Between the Lives* and *The Written Works*. These films are making a great impact across the state, and as a result, FIN Inquiry teams have been encouraged and supported to capture on video parts or all of their Inquiry.

All FIN teams were equipped with a video camera at the start of the grant along with a Mac laptop. These tools have already proven to be valuable to our teams. Video has been used in many ways: capture and report findings; record FIN team conversations about their Inquiry; observe students working in the classroom; interview students. FIN teams have been able to view their own footage and rethink their teaching strategies based on what they find in these videos. To check out the videos that are helping cause change please visit <http://www.vimeo.com/finand778films>

FIN COMMONS
BASIC SKILLS IN COMPLEX CONTEXTS

GETTING STARTED GRANT INFO STUDENT VOICES TUTORIALS TEAMS CALENDAR TAGS VIDEOS

THANKS FOR ALL YOUR HARD WORK, FINNERS!

Featured FIN Article

Screen shot from FINcommons.net

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The New Way Teams will be Sharing Their Work

Video is not the only technology FIN teams are encouraged to use. In January 2009, we launched FINcommons.net. This site is a space where teams can share information and receive feedback about their emerging inquiries. A major component of the FIN grant is for teams to share out what they're learning about students and student learning. In the coming year, we will be working with teams to build multimedia websites through which teams can share their inquiries with colleagues beyond FIN. Each team will develop a unique website designed as a place for the team to showcase its ideas about teaching, learning, and faculty development. Teams can expand the reach of their work from their college to the state and even national levels.



To request DVD copies of educational documentaries by 778 films, a partner of the Faculty Inquiry Network, please contact jchandler@chabotcollege.edu

Events

October

7-9

Strengthening Student Success Conference

This conference is held by the RP Group. FIN will be presenting 6 sessions during the conference as well as facilitating a pre-conference meeting and opening session. FIN presentations will include the leadership team as well as members from 10 of the FIN schools.

22-23

English Council of California Two-Year Colleges (ECCTYC): Pathways to Community 2009

FIN will be holding 3 presentations at the ECCTYC 2009 Conference.

November

1

End of Year Progress Reports and Continuation Proposals: Deadline

7

Regional Inquiry Meet-Ups held in Northern California—College of the Siskiyous, Berkeley, Las Positas, Laney, Alameda, LMC Puente, Skyline, LMC English

20

Regional Inquiry Meet-Ups held in Southern California—LATTC, San Diego Mesa, Glendale, Mt. SAC, LMC Umoja

21

Regional Inquiry Meet-Ups held in Southern California—Santa Barbara, ELAC, Cerritos, Santa Ana



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