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How to Teach English to At-Risk College Students
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ABSTRACT

An English instructor offers strategies that work for students who may understand conceptually why they chose to come to college but don't really know how to translate that motivation into effort.

FULL TEXT

Over the last 15 or so years, many colleges have seen an influx of a certain type of student. Beneath a show of bravado, these students' classroom demeanor is tentative. Their bursts of confidence are ephemeral; their hands descend as quickly as they are raised. When these students visit our offices, ostensibly to ask questions about homework, their strained expressions explain what their words cannot: They have questions but don't know how to put their thoughts into words. They may understand conceptually why they chose to come to college but don't really understand how to translate that motivation into effort. These students are at risk-at risk of failing, of dropping out, and of losing opportunity.

My observations of educationally at-risk students are drawn from my experiences as an English instructor in the State University of New York system, but the situation is prevalent elsewhere, too, usually at public universities and community colleges.

At-risk students usually share one or more of the following obstacles: Their families live below the poverty line, they are black or Hispanic, they come from single-parent homes, their mothers have less than a high-school education, the primary language spoken at home is not English. A report by the National Center for Education Statistics, "Programs at Higher Education Institutions for Disadvantaged Precollege Students" (2005), adds to that list one more risk factor: belonging to "the first generation in the family to attend college." A 2009 article in the National Education Association's Higher Education Journal explains the impediments first-generation college students can face: "parental ambivalence, lack of understanding, and even hostility to [the] child's college plans."

In order to help at-risk students to succeed-and thereby to succeed ourselves as instructors-we must meet students where they are. Of course, that doesn't mean holding their hands to the extent that they forget that they alone are responsible for their studies. But the only ethical thing for instructors to do is to try to be as accommodating as possible. Three practices are essential in helping at-risk students:

Provide structure in the classroom. I am continually surprised by my students' gratitude toward me for the daily agendas I write on the board. Though all instructors surely understand how helpful it is to provide structure for students, it seems that doing so isn't a very common practice in many classrooms these days.

Instructors should map out a master plan for each class session. I write the day, the date, and the word "Agenda," under which I place three or four bullet points followed by my plan of attack. My students have told me they appreciate the sense of direction that the day's agenda provides.

Instructors can also offer periodic final-grade predictions to help students understand how each assignment contributes to the whole course grade. I like to calculate the final grade each student will end up with, based upon the ones he or she has already earned, combined with hypothetical perfect scores on the remaining assignments; then hand out the reports (printed in an easy-to-read grid) on unimposing half-sheets of paper. The motivation students display after receiving such signifiers of the semester's structure is mind-boggling.

Finally, at the end of every day, I send out an e-mail to students who were absent. I try to include the key elements of the class, explain the homework, and attach copies of any handouts. Some may criticize this practice of filling in for absent students as a crutch that encourages them to skip class. But I still have a strict absence policy, and their absences do indeed count against them. The e-mail is just my way of letting absent students know that the world will move right along without them if they don't get with the program. I consider my message a compassionate reminder of this fact of life-which some of them have never have learned before.

Show the connection between classroom learning and the real world. To help your students understand the practical applications of what they're learning, try to link everything to the real world. For example, I have created a course unit called "Real-World Writing." It includes lessons on how to write effective resumes and cover letters, as well as letters of resignation and even obituaries. Students learn about the concept of different audiences far more quickly and effectively through such real-world writing than they do through essay assignments-which come later in the semester, after I've hooked their interest with work they perceive as more directly relevant to their lives.

Make your students accountable. Students generally work harder on their homework assignments if they are required to meet with the instructor and present their work aloud-especially if they are then graded on that oral presentation. As an undergraduate, I studied abroad at the University of Oxford, where the tutorial model is used widely. My Oxonian tutorials were terrifying and humbling, and served to hone my academic discipline more effectively than any other academic experience I have ever had.

Now I subject my students to the same experience. It is nothing short of amazing to see how much energy they put into papers when they know they'll have to present and defend their work face to face-as opposed to their usual, more lackadaisacal efforts, which involve typing mindlessly until 5 a.m., then sneaking the shoddy result under my door and failing to show up to class later that day.

Many students in the public and community-college systems don't know what it takes to succeed academically at the college level. It's the downside of the welcoming, egalitarian spirit of our admissions departments. There are simply more steps that we as educators must take to accommodate our students' needs. The principles of organization, connection, and accountability, elementary as they may seem, can reap tremendous results in terms of students' success.