

This is another posting written by Kelley Karandjeff about Katie Hern's work in her English classrooms at Chabot College in Hayward.

Bob Gabriner, Moderator Listserv

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In 2002, when Katie Hern joined the English faculty at Chabot College, she realized she had some work to do. She had been teaching English for a decade, but she had never taught a class in which reading was an explicit learning outcome. Now she would be teaching in a curriculum that integrates reading, reasoning, and writing at all levels, developmental through transfer. Hern realized that intentionally and directly addressing students' reading skills was a "component of my practice that I needed to strengthen...I was more of a writing teacher and not as much a reading teacher, and I needed to be."

To expand her "instructional tool kit", Hern initiated a practice of "working the reading" whereby she dedicates significant class time to engaging students in small group activity and whole class discussion about the basic meaning of assigned texts. "Previously, I had assumed that students understood the reading and could jump right into sophisticated critical discussions about the texts. But they didn't necessarily know what was going on." Hern now works with students to establish a baseline of comprehension—processing, digesting and then expressing the meaning of the reading in their own words. From there, she involves them in higher-order discussion and critique of the reading which ultimately serves as a basis for essay development.

To determine the effectiveness of this strategy, she set out to identify an appropriate assessment for evaluating students' reading comprehension and progression beyond her usual assignment of essays. Inspired by a colleague's use of reading tests, Hern created and integrated exams into her own curriculum. After "working the reading" through collaborative and active discussion in class, students take an open-book test requiring them to explain and respond to key ideas in the text—assessing their comprehension before they begin writing a formal essay on their reading. These tests build on informal assessments like classroom writing activity and online discussion posts that help Hern gauge and guide students' reading comprehension and development.

Hern finds this process of working the reading in class and testing students shows a strong and increased level of comprehension of assigned texts. In Spring 2008, over 91 percent of students received a grade of C or higher on their first reading test and 85 and 92 percent respectively on the subsequent two tests (combined results across three sections). Hern also cites a few key "lessons learned" through this process. She notes that in focusing in on and assessing this particular outcome in her course, she has discovered that many of the problems she historically observed in students' essays were actually reading—not writing—problems. "They hadn't really comprehended and engaged the texts so they weren't able to *use* their texts in their papers." She finds that focused attention to and assessment of students reading comprehension significantly improves their writing. As a result, Hern has actually cut back significantly on explicit attention to the writing process and essay form and the quality of the papers she receives still remains strong. She recognizes that "they don't need as much writing instruction as I thought they did."

Hern does acknowledge that with an increased focus on reading comprehension, students may struggle to develop strong, sharp thesis statements in their writing. Because students have an

increased understanding of the complexity of ideas presented in their texts, the “neatness of form may fall away initially.” Hern advises others not to be “too freaked” by this developmental stage as she sees improvement in students thesis writing over the course of the semester and feels that they can keep working on that particular skill in English 1A.

Hern plans to continue this assessment practice and is now thinking about additional ways to measure students’ reading facility in her course. She aims to learn more about students’ reading process with the goal of ensuring they are “strong independent readers who need less scaffolding when they enter college-level coursework.” Because the reading tests she employs tend to focus on students’ understanding of content, she is now exploring Reading Apprenticeship tools (from WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative) to identify an additional assessment of students’ reading process.

For Katie Hern’s full “A Window into Integrated Reading and Writing” powerpoint presentation from the 2008 Student Success Conference, a video of Hern’s course and other related resources, visit: <http://online.chabotcollege.edu/khern/>.