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ABOUT JCLL

The *Journal of College Literacy and Learning* (JCLL) (ISSN 0738-9523) welcomes material related to advancing scholarship on reading, writing, and academic success at the postsecondary level. JCLL is published by the College Literacy and Learning Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association and is intended to provide a forum for the exchange of information regarding research, theory, and practice.

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From the Editors

When Words Shape Learning: The Power of Language in College Literacy

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The words we use matter, especially in higher education, where instructors play a critical role in helping students adjust to college and find their place within it. This issue of *JCLL* highlights the power of language and the ways our word choices can either foster collective self-efficacy (Conley, 2025) or expose biases that shape decisions and social interactions (Li, 2017). In this way, language is not neutral; it can either open doors or reinforce barriers.

College literacy should not be understood as simply correcting student deficits. Rather, it involves expanding access, valuing diverse literacies, and creating conditions in which students can belong, participate, and succeed. The manuscripts in this issue align with the journal's broader editorial vision by treating literacy and learning as socially embedded practices shaped by language, culture, and institutional expectations. They also reflect the

journal's ongoing interest in scholarship and teaching practices that help students navigate college while preserving their identities and lived experiences.

In **“Quantifying Student Learning in a Writing Communications Course: Does Performance Increase by the End of the Semester?”** the author presents research that examines the learning achieved during a first-semester communication course with a focus on grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation. This manuscript discusses applications to teaching and sheds light on the disconnect that often happens between a student's ability and perceived ability.

Our next manuscript, **“Readiness Reimagined: A Phenomenological Study of the Ways NYC High School English Teachers Conceptualize and Enact College Literacy Preparation,”** shares the important research of eight New York City high school English teachers challenging the narrow and often test-based definition of college-readiness to advocate for a more holistic approach that emphasizes transferable skills that showcase readiness, including critical thinking, self-sufficiency, and adaptability.

In **“Exploring the Experiences of Students with Reading Difficulties in Higher Education,”** the researchers explore the increasing rates of reading difficulties in higher education. Through qualitative analysis, the study reveals a critical need for better awareness and support for students with reading challenges in higher education.

Finally, Orley Estrada offers a book review of *Community Colleges and First-Generation Students: Academic Discourse in the Writing Classroom* by Jennifer Osborn, a highly relevant text for institutions and instructors who are willing to examine how academic discourse can either constrain or expand students' sense of belonging and possibility, especially for first-generation and community college students.

We hope the manuscripts and book review featured in Volume 50 will be useful as you consider literacy and learning as socially embedded practices shaped by language, culture, and institutional expectations. As always, our goal is to share scholarship on current trends that will support you in your work as scholars and practitioners in the field of college literacy and learning.

We are grateful to the authors for sharing their important work, and to the many dedicated reviewers who generously contribute their time, energy, talents, and expertise to *JCLL*. Finally, we thank you, our readers, for your interest in and dedication to college literacy and learning, and for your continued support of this publication.

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Quantifying Student Learning in a Writing Communications Course: Does Performance Increase by the End of the Semester?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated learning achieved in a first-semester college communications course with a focus on grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation. To assess learning, 1285 students completed identical pre- and post-tests of 20 multiple-choice questions based on the course content. Data analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement in post-test scores ($p < .01$), suggesting a knowledge acquisition of approximately 20% throughout the course. Comparisons between semesters showed no meaningful difference in learning outcomes. However, post-test scores after the widespread adoption of ChatGPT were slightly higher. These findings support that meaningful learning occurred throughout this course, even if students may have perceived that their writing skills were not in need of improvement upon entry. Applications to teaching are discussed.

Keywords: communication, student learning, community college, pandemic, generative AI, writing skills

We all think we teach well and expect students to learn something after a semester in our courses, but are we able to demonstrate that empirically? The present study examines this very question. During many previous semesters of teaching this course, students have shared (anecdotally) their perception that they do not need to take a basic communications course focused primarily on developing their writing skills because they have been writing and communicating during their entire academic journey thus far, but we suspect that they don't typically have the foundational grammatical knowledge required for clear, written communication and that they are actually learning a lot during the semester. To investigate whether students are learning a significant amount of communication-related content (e.g., grammar, writing) and ensure that students are truly benefitting from the course (i.e., can successfully apply their understanding to improve writing), we undertook an analysis of secondary data collected over the last several years comparing student performance on a baseline quiz at the start of the semester to their performance on the same quiz at the end of the semester.

Literature Review

We suspect that most instructors attempt to create good, pedagogically sound learning environments for the students in their classroom (whether delivered virtually or in person). To do so, it's important to engage in continuing professional development and reflect on our classroom practices so that we can remain current and update course content based on changes in our professional fields while ensuring that our approach to learning is supported by (new) empirical evidence from the cognitive sciences (to best support student learning). In this way, instructors should be engaging in lifelong learning (Boyer, 1990). An important, and sometimes overlooked,

component of this scholarly and reflective practice, however, is to empirically investigate our pedagogical decisions and/or the impact of new learning activities in order to quantify (or qualify) how they might affect student learning. This Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is the process where instructors conduct research with the goal of describing, assessing, and/or improving teaching practices to benefit student learning (Hutchings, 2000; for a discussion of additional benefits of SoTL, interested readers may consult Bernstein, 2013 or McKinney, 2013). SoTL research questions typically describe something that is currently occurring in the classroom (a "what is" research question), what happens when a change is implemented (a "vision of the possible" research question), what practice(s) effectively support learning in the classroom (a "what works" research question), or what new conceptual framework could be developed to better understand the process of teaching and learning (Hutchings, 2000). The present study takes a "what is" approach and describes the quantified learning that occurred during a semester-long, 14-week communications course at a Canadian technical community college in Ontario.

Durable Skills

There is widespread acknowledgement (e.g., America Succeeds, 2025; Government of Canada, 2024) that durable skills, particularly effective communication skills, are essential for student success in both academic and professional settings. Cole et al. (2021) has identified ten major competencies that surpass subject-specific or vocation-specific mastery, and communication skills are among the competencies considered paramount in the swiftly shifting future employment landscape. With the need for students to master effective communication skills to successfully navigate their futures, courses dedicated to teaching

these skills are necessary. Writing skills, more specifically, are indispensable for students to meet their academic requirements and, likewise, to excel in their careers. The Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National Writing Project, 2011) emphasizes the importance of students' abilities to understand and apply appropriate writing conventions to achieve clarity in their writing. Furthermore, Hutson et al. (2023) suggest that there is a lack of research focused specifically on where or how durable skills are taught, despite the consensus on their importance. Likewise, they also recommend that course outlines and outcomes should readily identify which durable skills are specifically taught as part of the class.

Contributing to the challenge of developing students' writing skills is a seeming lack of student motivation. Students do not always see the importance of being able to write well, and consequently, are unmotivated to learn this essential (and durable) skill. They may underestimate the significance of writing as a durable skill or how it can impact their success. To develop motivation to improve their writing skills, students need to believe in writing's power and appreciate the value of writing well as a means to academic and social success (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

Metacognition

In addition to undervaluing the ability to write well, a lack of motivation also comes from students having an overconfident or inaccurate view of their own abilities. Students, perhaps most commonly those with weaker writing skills, may not have the awareness to be able to identify their limitations or need for improvement in writing, which points to weak metacognition (Flavell, 1979; Ramadhanti et al., 2019); this is another durable skill. Flavell (1979) coined the term metacognition to refer to the understanding of our own thinking or internal cognitive processes. Because students

often have underdeveloped metacognitive skills, they may assume that their writing skills are sufficient without being able to identify opportunities for growth. Without this understanding of the need to improve, students lack an accurate assessment of their specific learning requirements. As a result, they are not compelled to set goals to improve their writing skills and may avoid engaging in the required study and practice. In the same way, they may shift their attention to other skills or studies and be less inclined to put the effort into improving their writing. Metacognitive skills are very important in academic success (Iwai, 2011; Goctu, 2017) and this is particularly true in writing (Hacker et al., 2009).

One way that using a slow-stakes quiz in a course can help support student success and their metacognitive awareness is by addressing the overconfidence in their skills (i.e., demonstrating that they don't actually possess the skills/knowledge that they think they have). When this type of over-estimation occurs, previous research has demonstrated that students tend to stop studying prematurely, which negatively affects their performance (Dunlosky & Rawson, 2012). Pyc and Rawson (2012) also showed that simply retrieving information from memory can translate to students more accurately predicting their performance on a course exam (with the frequency of accurate retrievals being positively correlated with their accuracy of predicting their exam performance).

Writing Skills

Although writing has traditionally been (and will likely continue to be) the primary form of assessment in a post-secondary environment, writing well is not a skill that is easily mastered (Magaba, 2023). Likewise, there is often an underlying assumption that students offered admission into post-secondary institutions already possess the writing skills necessary for success (Magaba, 2023). This assumes that students have the required skills and knowledge regarding the form and

function of the language that permits them to express thoughts clearly and correctly. What is often missing from this equation is specific instruction aimed at developing students' writing skills to enhance their understanding of written language. How can students be asked to edit their own written work with the goal of refining expression with little to no knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation? In fact, students' overall academic performance could be markedly hampered simply due to underdeveloped writing skills.

Writing well is a demanding task. A good writer not only understands the mechanics of writing but also has a satisfactory vocabulary and organizes ideas to enhance the clarity of the thoughts expressed. As such, being able to speak clearly and correctly does not necessarily equate to the student also writing well. Likewise, teaching grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation deliberately does not automatically mean students will then seamlessly generate, organize, refine and edit their written thoughts for clearer expression. However, ignoring the importance of the fundamentals of writing will also not serve the goals of improving students' writing skills. In essence, each of the components of good writing needs to be addressed, and teaching students the fundamentals is necessary if we expect them to submit clear and correct written work and, likewise, to meet their intended academic goals.

More recently, an investigation of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve students' writing skills has shown that feedback provided by excellent instructors is of higher quality than that offered by the generative AI tool ChatGPT (Steiss et al., 2024). Likewise, it should be acknowledged that students who receive feedback on their writing from instructors are more readily able to seek clarification from them in developing their writing and they can also develop and maintain an ongoing relationship with the instructor; building such rapport has previously been

shown supports student learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Lammers et al., 2017). Further, any evidence supporting the idea that students learn skills from AI tools is not readily available. Therefore, it would be erroneous to infer that having an AI tool proofread and edit a student's written work to improve the writing necessarily or directly translates into a transfer of skills to the student writer. In short, the skills involved in writing clearly and correctly need to be deliberately taught by a human, and there is evidence that they can be taught successfully, even later in a student's academic journey (Devereux et al., 2006; Fallahi, 2012; Fallahi et al., 2006).

Present Study

Because students don't always know what they don't know (and need to learn) and to ensure that they were, indeed, learning something in this course, we examined student performance over the last several years on a pre-test and post-test occurring at the start and end of the semester. We expected students to perform significantly better on the post-test than they did on the pre-test. We also want to explore whether student performance on these assessments differed in two instances: pre- and post-pandemic as well as pre- and post ChatGPT availability. The rationale for these lines of inquiry stems from our own anecdotal experiences that, during the emergency remote delivery during the pandemic, students may not have had access to the same resources or supports, so students might be less successful during this period of time. At the same time, we wondered whether students might be more likely to use AI tools like ChatGPT to help them complete the quizzes during this time, possibly to compensate for this reduction of support.

An additional unique contribution of the present study is that the population of interest are college students enrolled in one-, two-, and three-year credentials (certificates, diplomas, and advanced diplomas in the Ontario college system), rather than the

typically studied 4-year undergraduate university student population. The two-year Ontario diploma credential would loosely map on to an associate degree in the United States (US). The institution delivering the course in question for the present study would be most comparable to a community college in the US. Others (e.g., Hewlett, 2016; Karp, 2011; Kennette & Cappon, 2024; Kennette & Chapman, 2024) have previously highlighted the limited data examining college students' learning and the importance of studying this underrepresented group since college students are a unique population of students who may not benefit from the same interventions/approaches (or not respond in the same way) as university students.

Method

Participants

After receiving approval to access the data for secondary use by our institution's ethics review board, we obtained data from 1285 viable students (students who did not complete both the pre-test and the post-test were excluded from our analysis). The data collection included the semesters from Fall 2016 to Winter 2023 (inclusively). Only Fall and Winter semesters were included as the authors did not typically teach in the Spring or Summer (May-August) semester. Of this sample, 71.67% ($n = 921$) were from students in the Fall semester. Students who were taking this required course (COMM 1715) were students enrolled in one of two preparatory programs (General Arts and Science or Pre-Health Sciences) in order to help them gain the skills required to be successful in the program they eventually complete. For privacy reasons, we accessed only the grades of students in the sections taught by two of the authors, who regularly taught this course.

Materials and Procedure

taught Data from students enrolled in a basic communications course, which focuses on

grammar and basic writing mechanics (COMM 1715), in every semester from Fall 2016 to Winter 2023 were collected from the learning management system and anonymized. Two different instructors downloaded their data on the two quizzes of interest (pre-test and post-test) and stripped it of identifying information (name and student number). Data were combined into a single database and tagged for semester, instructor, and student program (if known, as sometimes students from multiple programs were combined into a single section). The first quiz (pre-test) occurred in week 1 and 2 while the second quiz (post-test) occurred in weeks 13 and/or 14 of a 14-week semester. Students completed these online as part of their weekly online work for this course. Students earned a bonus 1% added to their final grade for completing both quizzes (regardless of the performance demonstrated/score earned). The intent was to incentivize the quiz completion, but not necessarily the score. One of the reasons for this was because the instructors felt it was important that students complete the quizzes to have the opportunity to reflect on their score, thus providing an opportunity for metacognitive growth, particularly as the instructors referred back to the quiz throughout the semester (and asking students to reflect on the importance of writing and of the course that develops those skills). The quiz was comprised of 20 items, all of which were multiple choice, and included questions related to the following topics: sentence structure (subjects and verbs, fragments, run-on sentences), punctuation (comma use, apostrophe use, quotation marks, semicolon use, colon use), parts of speech, homonyms/word choice, pronoun agreement, verb form/tense, subject-verb agreement, modifiers, and parallel structure. Most of the question stems in the quiz were similar to one of the following (with 4 multiple choice response options) for the topics above: Read the following sentences and choose the sentence which is grammatically correct; or

Read the following sentences, and choose the correct form of the verb.

Results & Discussion

This resulted in a final sample size of 1,285 students who provided data pairs (pre-test, post-test) for these analyses. Data were also visually inspected for outliers (none) and normality (histogram and Q-Q plot) to assess normality before proceeding with the analyses.

Although many cutoff values have been proposed as rules of thumb to determine whether skew and kurtosis are within normal range ($+/-1$, $+/-2$, $+/-3$, and $+/-7$, respectively), our data indicate normality even using the most conservative of these cutoffs (Bulmer, 1979; Byrne, 2010; George & Mallery, 2010; Hair et al., 1998). Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre-test quiz scores (%) and post-test quiz scores (%)

	Pre-test	Post-test
N	1285	1285
Mode	40.000	55.000
Median	40.000	60.000
Mean	40.603	58.545
Std. Deviation	12.994	19.614
Skewness	0.316	-0.009
Kurtosis	0.247	-0.485
Minimum	5.000	5.000
Maximum	85.000	100.000

Of primary interest was whether students demonstrated any increase from the pre-test at the start of the semester to the post-test administered during the final weeks. Indeed, there was a significant difference ($t(1284) = 35.02$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.977$) in the expected direction, with post-test scores being greater than pre-test scores (see Table 1). This seems

to indicate learning gains of nearly 20%, on average, by students over the course of the semester. Although the questions were the same in both the pre-test and the post-test, students only had one attempt and were not given any feedback about their performance, so it is unlikely that, 12-14 weeks later, students applied their memory of their (possibly) correct

responses on the pre-test to improve their performance on the post-test. A testing effect (enhanced memory for previously-tested material) could, however, explain part of this gain, as students were required to complete weekly grammar quizzes, potentially improving their memory for this material (Karpicke & Roediger, 2008; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006; Wang & Yang, 2024) and/or their quiz-taking strategies or abilities, unrelated to their content knowledge (Dolly & Williams, 1986; Sarnacki, 1979; Sweetnam, 2003 (as cited in Dodeen, 2015); Varranapath & Jaiprayoon, 1999). This prior experience with testing could also have also increased their familiarity with this type of assessment, enhancing their performance (Poppenk et al. 2010), or reduced students test-related anxiety, resulting in some of performance gains we found (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007; Dutke & Stober, 2001; Eisenkraemer et al., 2013; Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007; Yang et al., 2023). Future research should examine these possibilities experimentally.

To further probe this significant difference in performance over time, we examined whether this change differed by semester (fall, winter) or student program (General Arts and Science, Pre-Health Sciences, mixture). By semester, performance didn't differ in either the pre-test ($t(1283) = .53, p = .60$) or the post-test ($t(1283) = 1.03, p = .31$). Looking at the type of program, performance also didn't differ for the pre-test ($F(2, 1282) = .094, p = .45$) or the post-test ($F(2, 1282) = 1.03, p = .36$). This information could be used in course delivery planning and program of study decision-making: since there were no differences, it seems unlikely that the time of year (fall, winter) that the course is offered will have an impact on student performance (though, despite students being enrolled in the course during both the fall and winter semesters, it is important to note that all students completed the course during the first semester of their respective programs; the programs just have multiple intakes per year). Some previous

studies have provided evidence that both direct (in the room) and indirect (seasonal) temperature has an impact on student performance (e.g., Alberto et al., Arceo-Gomez & Lopez-Feldman, 2024; 2021; Wang et al, 2018; Zang & de Dear, 2017), so it would be possible to expect to see such differences in our data, but we found no direct evidence of this in our analyses.

We also wanted to examine whether the pandemic (pre-COVID, during COVID, post-COVID) had an effect on student performance. The omnibus test was marginally significant for the pre-test ($F(2, 1282) = 2.998, p = .05, \eta^2 = .005$), but none of the posthoc pairwise comparisons were (with p-values ranging from .08 to 1.0). Examining the mean, we see that the pre-pandemic performance ($M = 39.77, SD = 12.44$) was slightly lower than student performance both during the pandemic ($M = 41.22, SD = 13.76$) and once classes had returned to campus post-pandemic ($M = 41.84, SD = 13.17$). For the post test, however, there is a clearer picture that emerges, with both a significant difference on the omnibus test ($F(2, 1282) = 19.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .029$), as well as the posthoc comparisons (Bonferroni correction). The post-pandemic scores were significantly higher than both the pre-pandemic scores ($t = 5.82, p < .001$) and the scores obtained during the pandemic ($t = 5.38, p < .001$), each demonstrating a mean gain of approximately 8%, with the post-pandemic average score being 65.09% ($SD = 20.72$). Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that the pandemic had an immediate and ongoing impact on students' social (Senter, 2023) mental (Hirshberg et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2022) and physical health (Colley & Saunders, 2023; Wilson et al., 2021) and their learning (Aguaded et al., 2023) and education as a whole (Banihashem et al., 2023), but the increase in scores was a bit of a surprise given that research often points to a decline in performance due to the pandemic's impact.

Although all of these quizzes were completed online during all three of these

periods, it's interesting to note that a difference only emerged on the post-test across these three time periods. We wondered, then, if this could have coincided with the arrival of generative AI (particularly ChatGPT), since there was a lot of overlap between these periods. As such, we examined whether performance was affected by the mass availability of ChatGPT by comparing student

scores prior to December 2022, and from January 2023 onward. Here, we found a similar pattern of results with marginally significant differences in the pre-test data ($t(1283) = 1.97$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.086$) and significant differences in the post-test data ($t(1283) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.09$). The corresponding descriptive statistics are in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for student pre-test scores (%) and post-test scores (%) divided by semester to reflect those taught before the arrival of ChatGPT and those taught since.

		N	Mean	SD
Pre-test	GPT	154	42.532	13.519
	PreGPT	1131	40.340	12.905
Post-test	GPT	154	66.981	21.186
	PreGPT	1131	57.396	19.114

Although the sample size is much smaller, student scores after the introduction of ChatGPT do appear to be slightly inflated. The effect sizes are very small, however. Thinking about how much the scores have been inflated, the statistically significant increase of approximately 5% is only indicating a better score of 1 question per student on average (out of 20) and the number of students who earned 100% on the post-test is proportional in both the pre-GPT and GPT groups. Although it is certainly possible that students used ChatGPT to complete these short quizzes, scores do not show extreme skew or ceiling effects nor are they inflated to such a degree that there is cause for alarm. Further, student motivation to cheat typically results from the stress of time or grade/performance pressures (Henderson et al., 2023; Waltzer & Dahl, 2022), so it seems

unlikely that students would be motivated to engage in an unauthorized use of ChatGPT for this assessment, particularly because these quizzes were optional and completed outside of class for a bonus point (i.e., students' actual performance on the quizzes did not proportionally affect their grade in the course, so students were unlikely to be particularly motivated to use unauthorized aids in order to inflate their scores since, regardless of the score, it wouldn't affect their final grade). This was also a very low-stakes quiz, and one would assume that the motivation to earn a high grade would be greater in a high-stakes environment; the literature is less clear on this, with some reporting a higher likelihood of cheating on high-stakes tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2005), while others demonstrated that even in high-stakes testing situations, adults aren't likely to

cheat (Arthur et al., 2010). Nonetheless, future attempts to implement this type of activity would benefit from a more proctored, in-class completion now that ChatGPT and other generative AI tools are so ubiquitous.

One major limitation of this study is that it was a secondary analysis on data previously collected from students. This means that we were unable to obtain demographic data and ensure a representative sample. It is possible that our sample of students who completed both the pre-test and the post-test only captured two ends of the population distribution rather than collecting a representative: both the students at risk of failing and those who are motivated to earn the highest possible marks could have been more likely to complete these optional quizzes for the bonus mark than other students in the course. Future research should collect demographic information to be better able to link the conclusions drawn to a specific sample or feel relatively confident that the sample is representative of the population. Additionally, because these quizzes were completed online and were not invigilated, we cannot be confident that no cheating occurred, though if there was some cheating, it was likely minimal since most students did not earn 100% on either quiz. Additionally, since these optional quizzes were non-punitive (no lower grade for not completing them) and the score didn't affect the mark received (simply completing it earned the student the bonus mark), we don't believe that there is a high risk of cheating. Nonetheless, future research could examine whether invigilation changed the patterns reported here.

Applications to Teaching

The quiz used for this study was originally introduced as an opportunity to help students develop better metacognitive skills (which is an important durable skill) and reduce student overconfidence in their writing abilities by demonstrating to them that they didn't have all of the skills they thought they had. We suggest

that one way to improve on the approach described herein is that instructors could explicitly support students as they engage in metacognitive reflections around this quiz element by adding a formal class discussion and/or a personal reflective piece to make this development more intentional and evident to students. Although explicit metacognitive instruction and/or interventions are more impactful than the more implicit approach used here (pre/post quizzes), various institutional and course-related factors might limit the amount of explicit instruction which can be included in a course, so instructors might choose to implement a more implicit approach to support metacognitive growth in students. The quizzes used here still provide students with an opportunity to engage in self-directed metacognitive reflection based on their quiz performance.

Teaching writing is a time-consuming and effortful process that requires constant feedback, a lot of practice, and multiple iterations of the same piece of writing. This process is unlike many content-specific learning outcomes where students are understanding or defining concepts or completing problems to which there is only one solution. For writing, large class sizes make this process particularly challenging. Student overconfidence may be the consequence of teacher overwork system-wide because they lack the time to provide the individualized education which would benefit student writing most. Additionally, although most subjects use writing as part of their assessments, the skills developed in a writing course are often siloed and not applied to contexts outside that class. This transfer of learning to areas beyond the actual writing course, provides additional opportunities for students to practice these durable skills, but students may not be motivated to put in the additional writing effort, particularly if rubrics don't contain a portion of the grade for writing and grammar.

As instructors, we likely monitor our effectiveness in the classroom already, though

perhaps not in a formal, empirical way. However, this is an important step, both to guide our own pedagogical decisions and to help us (and others) to better understand student learning. In addition to our own peace of mind, knowing that students are learning what we're intending for them to learn is an important component to help students develop their metacognition, particularly as quantifying their learning helps them judge how much they've learned and in what areas they still need to build their skills. Future research could build on the findings described herein and examine metacognition explicitly by asking students to report their metacognitive processes before and/or after both the pre-test and the post-test.

are effective and then work with students to assess the impact. Setting goals and tracking progress during study sessions can help students understand how and when learning is taking place (e.g., how many terms could I remember this time?). To expand the learning opportunities provided by tests and quizzes, instructors can have students complete a set of questions to reflect on the study tools they used and how effective they were (Lovett, 2013). Academic coaching and tutoring sessions can also provide a context to check in on how students are applying generative study

strategies, assess their effectiveness, and make enhancements. If students have tangible evidence that the generation effect is having a positive impact on their learning, this improvement acts as an incentive to continue using these methods. Alternatively, guided self-assessment can help students monitor and reflect on their studying in order to improve the when, where, and how of their approaches (McCabe, 2011).

Concluding Remarks

Quantifying learning is important for both the instructor and the students. Many students find writing well to be challenging, and improving writing skills requires time and focus. Students who may not have believed their writing skills needed any remediation were, nonetheless, able to see improvement in their skills, which will, hopefully, also improve their confidence in their written communication skills more broadly. Students who were able to see an improvement between their pre- and post-test scores have an objective measure of their improvement in the course concepts, which is an important step in solidifying learning.

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Readiness Reimagined: A Phenomenological Study of the Ways NYC High School English Teachers Conceptualize and Enact College Literacy Preparation

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores how eight New York City high school English teachers conceptualize and enact college readiness in their curriculum and pedagogy. Using semi-structured interviews and a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study identifies key themes of readiness, including critical thinking, self-sufficiency, and adaptability. Teachers emphasized the development of transferable literacy skills; resource utilization; and flexible, student-centered pedagogy. The findings challenge narrow, test-based definitions of college readiness and advocate for a more holistic approach that emphasizes cross-sector collaboration and curriculum design reflecting diverse postsecondary pathways. These results contribute to ongoing conversations on college-literacy preparation and offer implications for policy, curriculum development, and teacher collaboration.

Keywords: college readiness; transferable literacy skills; student-centered pedagogy; critical thinking

Introduction

Despite a sustained national focus on college readiness, a significant number of high school graduates continue to enter postsecondary institutions underprepared for the literacy demands of college coursework (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Fanetti et al., 2014; Smale, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Wahleithner, 2020). Research consistently highlights a disconnect between high school English instruction and the analytical reading, evidence-based writing, and critical thinking skills expected in college classrooms (Fanetti et al., 2010; French, 2018; Sommers & Saltz, 2004). As education systems attempt to address this gap, debates persist about how college readiness should be defined, assessed, and enacted, especially in literacy-rich disciplines like English.

Emerging scholarship urges a shift away from reductive, test-based metrics and toward more inclusive, transferable, and justice-oriented approaches to readiness (Burdick & Greer, 2017; Conley, 2014; Kareem, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020). These frameworks conceptualize readiness not as a fixed benchmark, but as a developmental process encompassing critical literacy, identity formation, academic resilience, and cultural responsiveness. However, while research on student outcomes, institutional policies, and assessment frameworks has grown, the perspectives of high school educators, i.e., those directly responsible for interpreting and implementing readiness goals, remain underrepresented (Addison & McGee, 2010; Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019).

High school English classrooms are key sites for postsecondary preparation, yet there is little consensus on what college-level literacy actually entails or how best to prepare students for it (Wahleithner, 2020). Existing studies reveal that educators define readiness in varied and sometimes conflicting ways, invoking terms such as academic stamina, textual analysis, epistemological agility, and

metacognitive self-regulation (Bloom et al., 2010; Conley, 2014; Kareem, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020). These definitions are influenced by institutional demands, local student demographics, equity commitments, and broader tensions between standardized accountability and authentic learning experiences.

Recent calls for more practitioner-informed, context-sensitive approaches to readiness emphasize the need to draw from the expertise of teachers who understand their students' strengths, challenges, and trajectories (Leonard, 2014; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Tierney & Duncheon, 2015). Investigating how educators conceptualize and enact readiness, particularly in English classrooms, is therefore a critical area for inquiry. By foregrounding the lived experiences of teachers, this study contributes to reimagining college literacy preparation from the ground up.

This descriptive phenomenological study, informed by Moustakas's (1994) transcendental principles, explores how eight high school English teachers in New York City conceptualize and support college readiness through their curriculum and pedagogy. It is guided by two research questions: (1) How do 11th–12th grade English teachers in New York City conceptualize and address college readiness in their curriculum and pedagogy? (2) How do they articulate their roles in supporting students' transitions from high school to college? Drawing on in-depth interviews and a rigorous phenomenological analysis, this study surfaces the meaning-making processes teachers engage in as they navigate evolving definitions of readiness. Findings highlight how participants resist reductive metrics, adapt to shifting student needs, and create learning environments where literacy preparation is dynamic, student-centered, and grounded in deep knowledge of learners. In doing so, the study illuminates both the tensions and the transformative possibilities at the high school–college literacy boundary, offering implications

for more responsive and equity-oriented curriculum development.

Literature Review

Persistent Challenges in the High School-College Literacy Transition

A substantial body of research has documented ongoing challenges in students' transitions from high school English coursework to college-level literacy expectations. Many students struggle with the heightened cognitive demands of postsecondary reading and writing, including sustained argumentation, source synthesis, and critical engagement with complex texts (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Fanetti et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020; Wahleithner, 2020). These difficulties are not only academic in nature. Students frequently describe the emotional intensity of the transition using terms such as “fear,” “frustration,” and “yearning” (French, 2018). Sommers and Saltz (2004) frame this shift as a “paradigm” change, wherein students must move beyond summary toward interpretation, inquiry, and epistemological risk-taking.

Despite growing awareness of these challenges, nearly half of students enter college without well-developed skills in source evaluation, rhetorical adaptability, and analytical writing, which are capacities not always emphasized in high school instruction (McCormick & Hafner, 2017; Smale, 2020). Misaligned expectations between secondary and postsecondary educators further compound these difficulties (Springer et al., 2014), leaving students to navigate a pedagogical and cultural shift with limited support.

Stakeholder Tensions and Conflicting Readiness Definitions

One source of this misalignment lies in the divergent definitions of “college readiness” promoted by various stakeholders, including state policymakers, testing agencies, textbook publishers, and university admissions offices (Burdick & Greer, 2017). While high schools may prioritize graduation requirements and

standardized assessments, colleges often define readiness through placement exams and remediation cutoffs (Conley, 2007; 2014). These contrasting frameworks produce contradictory messages and offer little shared guidance for educators or students.

Moreover, standardized assessments, often used as gatekeepers of readiness, have come under increasing scrutiny for privileging dominant linguistic and cultural norms. Such tests may marginalize students from multilingual, immigrant, or historically underserved backgrounds (Kareem, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020). Scholars argue that these tools flatten difference, reify structural inequities, and obscure the contextual and relational dimensions of literacy (Benson & Owens, 2022).

Broader and More Inclusive Models of College Literacy

In response to these critiques, researchers have called for expanded conceptions of college literacy readiness, including models that incorporate cultural responsiveness, civic literacy, identity development, and critical consciousness alongside traditional academic competencies (Conley, 2014; Kolluri & Tierney, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2020). Rather than imposing a singular standard, emerging frameworks emphasize adaptability, metacognition, and the transferability of literacy skills across academic, professional, and community contexts (Barnes et al., 2010; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Gale & Parker, 2014).

There is increasing consensus that readiness must be understood as an iterative, co-constructed, and locally situated process involving educators, students, families, and communities (Addison & McGee, 2010; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). However, the implementation of such frameworks remains limited. In the absence of systemic reforms, teachers are often left to interpret and enact readiness goals independently. In doing so, they draw on their pedagogical expertise,

school cultures, and professional values.

The Role of High School English Teachers in Reimagining Readiness

High school English teachers are uniquely positioned to influence students' postsecondary literacy trajectories. Yet their perspectives are often marginalized in policy discussions and readiness research (Burdick & Greer, 2017; Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019). When teachers are included in cross-sector collaborations, such as through shared rubrics, dialogic curriculum development, or professional exchanges, studies show improved alignment and student outcomes (Hernandez, 2017; Leonard, 2014). Despite this promise, most secondary teachers report limited interaction with college faculty, even as they are tasked with preparing students for postsecondary success (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021).

Further complicating this transition is the lack of a shared discourse across educational levels. Without a "common vocabulary of practice" (Dennihiy, 2015), students must decode unfamiliar academic expectations, genres, and feedback systems with little explicit preparation (Yancey, 2007). This communication gap underscores the urgency of fostering cross-sector dialogue about what college-level literacy entails and how it is best supported.

The Case for Teacher-Centered Inquiry into Postsecondary Preparation

As calls for more inclusive, adaptive models of readiness continue to grow, scholars have underscored the need to understand how educators themselves make sense of and implement these frameworks in local contexts (Sullivan et al., 2020; Wahleithner, 2020). English teachers in particular work at the intersection of policy mandates and student realities, often adapting their pedagogy in response to competing demands, shifting definitions, and diverse learner needs. Rather than seeking a universalized model of readiness, researchers increasingly advocate for

approaches that center teacher agency, situated expertise, and localized experimentation (Minor, 2019; Mundorf et al., 2019). From this perspective, significant change is more likely to emerge from the ground up, through inquiry into teachers' lived experiences, professional tensions, and pedagogical innovations.

This study builds on that foundation by employing a phenomenological approach to explore how a diverse group of New York City high school English teachers conceptualize and enact college readiness in their classrooms. By foregrounding educator perspectives, this research aims to illuminate how literacy transitions are experienced, negotiated, and reimagined, offering insight into the pedagogical conditions that foster more equitable and impactful college preparation.

Methodology

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore how high school English teachers in New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) conceptualize and enact college readiness through their curriculum and pedagogy. Grounded in the work of Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a shared phenomenon by prioritizing participants' lived experiences and systematically bracketing the researcher's own assumptions. This methodological approach was well suited to examining "college readiness," a contested and variably defined concept, through the perspectives of those tasked with implementing it in diverse, real-world classrooms.

Phenomenology, as a research tradition, centers on the careful description and analysis of participants' meaning-making. Moustakas's transcendental variant emphasizes epoche (or bracketing), in which the researcher suspends preconceptions to engage more fully with the participants' frames of reference. In this study, that stance allowed for a deeper understanding of how teachers define, interpret, and respond to the complex and often conflicting demands associated with

postsecondary preparation. Rather than testing hypotheses or seeking generalizable trends, the goal was to surface the textured and structural dimensions of experience as articulated by teachers themselves.

This methodological orientation aligned with the study's research questions, which sought to investigate not only how teachers define college readiness, but also how they perceive their roles in shaping students' transitions to college-level literacy. Through open-ended interviews and phenomenological analysis, the study foregrounded educators' voices, illuminating how readiness is conceptualized, enacted, and reimagined within the dynamic and often constrained contexts of public high school English instruction.

Context and Participants

This study was situated within NYCPS and the surrounding metro region, a diverse and complex educational ecosystem impacted by layered accountability mandates, stark resource disparities, and ongoing efforts to promote equity in postsecondary access. New York City's high schools serve students from a wide range of racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, often within schools marked by differing levels of institutional support, curricular autonomy, and external perception. This context offered a rich site for examining how English teachers make sense of and enact "college readiness" amid institutional complexity and shifting definitions of literacy preparation.

As seen in Table 1, eight high school English teachers participated in this study, each selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in college preparatory instruction and their capacity for reflective dialogue. While all participants worked in NYCPS schools or affiliated programs, their institutional contexts varied significantly in terms of size, selectivity, student demographics, and graduation and college enrollment rates. School settings included large

comprehensive high schools, partially screened schools, a Title I transfer school, and an elite AP-track suburban campus. This variation allowed for a textured understanding of how readiness is interpreted and operationalized in response to local conditions.

Participants taught primarily in 11th and 12th grade classrooms, with most also teaching Advanced Placement (AP) or senior capstone courses designed to approximate college-level rigor. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 10 to 38 years, and all held tenured status. Seven of the eight participants had served in formal instructional leadership roles such as department chair, instructional coach, or curriculum lead, lending further insight into both classroom and organizational perspectives on readiness. All participants taught in schools with substantial Black, Latinx, multilingual, and/or economically marginalized student populations, and several worked in schools where fewer than 60% of students enrolled in college following graduation.

The diversity within the participant pool was not intended to represent all NYCPS educators, but to illuminate a range of situated experiences and pedagogical approaches. Participants were chosen not only for their positional relevance but for their demonstrated capacity to reflect on the philosophical, political, and practical dimensions of their work. Their voices, grounded in local expertise and daily practice, form the core of this study's exploration of how college literacy preparation is imagined, enacted, and reimagined in real time.

Table 1

Participant Demographics Table

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Grade Level(s)	Leadership Roles	Tenure	School Location	Student Body	Screened	Title 1	HS Graduation	College Enrollment	College Readiness Index
David	10	11	Y	Y	Bronx	420	N	Y	90%	54%	42
Harmony	13	11-12, AP	N	Y	Brooklyn	980	Y	N	95%	89%	91
James	38	12, AP	Y	Y	Brooklyn	3620	partial	N	83%	73%	69
Nathan	19	11, 12, AP	Y	Y	Manhattan	1460	partial	N	97%	74%	84
Nina	18	10, 11, 12	Y	Y	Manhattan; Westchester	1600	N	N	95%	91%	not available
Prince	18	10, YABC	Y	Y	Bronx	250	N	Y	76%	39%	25
Savannah	12	11	Y	Y	Bronx	250	N	Y	90%	54%	42
Sophia	16	11	Y	Y	Manhattan	450	N	Y	92%	73%	70

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom between January and March 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and followed an open-ended protocol designed to elicit participants’ beliefs, reflections, and situated practices related to college readiness. Questions prompted teachers to define readiness in their own terms, describe instructional approaches, reflect on student needs and transitions, and consider the institutional forces that shaped their work. For example, participants were asked, “How do you define college readiness in your classroom?” and “What does preparing students for postsecondary literacy look like in your teaching?”

This approach allowed participants to narrate their experiences with both flexibility and depth, often using classroom vignettes or student stories to ground their reflections. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, professionally transcribed,

and checked for accuracy by the researcher. Immediately after each interview, analytic memos were written to capture emerging insights, moments of resonance, or potential areas for further exploration. These memos also served as part of the bracketing process, in which the researcher noted prior assumptions and worked to suspend interpretive bias.

To preserve confidentiality, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to all participants and removed identifying details. In parallel with these ethical safeguards, the researcher also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection phase to document evolving thoughts, reactions, and ethical considerations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the procedures outlined in Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology, emphasizing the careful description and synthesis of participants’ lived experiences. The researcher adhered to the key steps of bracketing, horizontalization, clustering themes, and

synthesizing textural and structural descriptions.

Bracketing and Reflexivity

To begin the analysis, the researcher engaged in a process of bracketing, setting aside any preconceptions or assumptions about the concept of college readiness. This allowed the researcher to approach the data without bias, ensuring that the participants' voices would take precedence. The researcher acknowledged and documented prior experiences as a teacher and researcher in a reflective journal, which was revisited periodically to ensure that personal perspectives did not interfere with the interpretation of the data.

Horizontalization and Initial Meaning Units

The researcher then engaged in horizontalization, which involved reading and rereading the interview transcripts to identify significant statements that represented the participants' lived experiences. Each statement was treated as having equal value. For example, one teacher, Nina, stated, "College readiness is more about skill sets than it is about content." Similarly, Nathan noted, "Strong analytical skills, problem-solving, writing, ability to read well—that's what we teach." These significant statements were extracted from the data and treated as meaningful units, capturing the essence of participants' perceptions of college readiness.

Clustering and Theming

After horizontalizing the data, the researcher clustered the significant statements into themes. These themes were developed through repeated readings and discussions with colleagues. The themes emerged inductively, reflecting the participants' experiences and perspectives on college readiness. One prominent theme that emerged was the emphasis on critical thinking and complexity of thought. For example, Sophia explained,

"We're increasing the complexity of our ideas and expressing contradictory thoughts in complex sentences." This theme was aligned with the broader literature on the importance of critical thinking in college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2014).

Another recurring theme across interviews was self-sufficiency and responsibility. Savannah emphasized the importance of teaching students to use resources independently: "Make sure they're utilizing all of their resources... Here, they truly have an army to support them." This theme reflects the importance of developing independent academic habits, a key aspect of readiness for higher education (Smale, 2020).

Table 2 presents the coded cluster response frequency, summarizing the key themes that emerged across participants' responses, reflecting the consistency and variation in their perspectives on college readiness and educator roles.

Table 2

Coded Cluster Response Frequency

Cluster	David	Harmony	James	Nathan	Nina	Prince	Savannah	Sophia
RQ1: How do 11th–12th grade English teachers in New York City conceptualize and address college readiness in their curriculum and pedagogy?								
Knowledge and utilization of resources	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Complexity of thinking	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Self-management, responsibility, and preparedness	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
RQ2: How do they articulate their roles in supporting students' transitions from high school to college?								
Emphasize transferable literacy skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Create multiple pathways	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Provide exposure, variety, and choice	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Embrace flexibility and scaffolding	X		X	X		X	X	X
Cultivate knowledge of students	X	X	X	X	X	X		

Textual and Structural Descriptions

Once themes were identified, the researcher began constructing textual descriptions, which describe “what” participants experienced, followed by structural descriptions, which explain “how” the experiences occurred. The textual descriptions were drawn directly from participants’ words, with quotes used to illustrate key points. For instance, James shared, “They need to be ready to engage with texts from all corners of the world, to read critically and be okay with not having all the answers right away.” This reflects the complexity and depth that participants associated with the concept of college readiness.

The structural descriptions examined the contexts in which these experiences occurred. For instance, many participants spoke about the challenges students face when transitioning to college writing, such as the need for critical literacy skills and academic resilience. David noted, “If you didn’t have time to read yet, you still need to be prepared... It’s about taking control of your education.” This statement emphasized the structural

elements of preparedness that transcend simply mastering content knowledge and include developing the habits and skills needed to navigate the complexities of higher education.

Composite Description

Finally, the researcher synthesized the data from all participants into a composite description that encapsulated the essence of the phenomenon under study. This overarching description reflected the commonalities and differences in how teachers conceptualize college readiness. The final composite description emphasized that readiness is viewed by these educators as a multidimensional process, incorporating critical thinking, self-sufficiency, resource utilization, and adaptability. It also underscored the importance of supporting students’ transitions by fostering an environment of flexibility and scaffolding to meet students at varying levels of readiness. These findings aligned with contemporary research that advocates for a holistic and inclusive approach to college readiness (Conley, 2012; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015).

Positionality Statement

Denise Bruxelles, the primary researcher and a doctoral student at the time of this study, draws on a professional background in both high school and college English instruction that is grounded in constructivist educational principles and post-liberatory ideals. Committed to fostering student-centered learning environments, the researcher embraces subjectivity as a fundamental aspect of educational research, acknowledging the diverse factors, identities, and contexts that shape knowledge. Previous qualitative research, including a study on the use of alumni feedback for curriculum development at Columbia University and a Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching focused on K-16 education access, has further influenced the researcher's approach. This work reflects a strong desire to bridge gaps between high school and college literacy practices. Given the personal and professional significance of this study, the researcher maintained continuous reflection through bracketing and member-checks to ensure that their subjectivity did not overshadow participants' lived experiences.

Tiffany Karalis served as the primary dissertation advisor and chair, providing guidance to Denise Bruxelles throughout the design and execution of the study. The second author also played a supportive role in transforming the dissertation into a journal-length article, ensuring that the research met academic publication standards. Their contributions included providing both theoretical and practical insights, helping to clarify and enhance the coherence of the study's findings.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed bracketing, member checking, and transparency in the research process. Bracketing, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), involves identifying and setting aside the researcher's personal experiences with the

phenomenon to focus solely on the participants' lived experiences. The researcher engaged in reflective journaling throughout the study to monitor potential biases and ensure that participants' voices remained central in the analysis. Member checking was used to enhance credibility by sharing data transcripts with participants for their feedback. Four participants confirmed the accuracy of the findings, while one provided additional information, strengthening the trustworthiness of the results.

Ethical considerations were a critical focus in this study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals were obtained from both the University at Buffalo, where Denise Bruxelles was a doctoral student at the time of the study and Tiffany Karalis is a professor, and from NYCPS, ensuring adherence to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and de-identified data. Participants were fully informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, further ensuring ethical integrity throughout the research process. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained to document research decisions, coding structures, and analytic choices, ensuring transparency and reliability in the study's findings.

Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study based on the analysis of interviews with eight high school English teachers in New York City. Through an in-depth phenomenological analysis, several themes emerged, highlighting the multifaceted nature of college readiness as viewed through the lenses of these teachers. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) How do 11th–12th grade English teachers in New York City conceptualize and address college readiness in their curriculum and pedagogy? (2) How do they articulate their roles in supporting students' transitions from high school to college?

The findings reveal that the teachers in this study conceptualized college readiness as a complex, multidimensional process that goes beyond academic content knowledge. Rather than a narrow focus on standardized test preparation, college readiness was framed as the cultivation of transferable skills that students can use across various postsecondary pathways. Teachers described strategies for fostering critical thinking, self-management, and adaptability, as well as the importance of equipping students with the ability to independently navigate academic resources and assignments. These findings are discussed in relation to existing research, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and flexible approach to college literacy preparation that transcends standardized metrics.

Theme 1: Knowledge and Utilization of Resources

One of the most significant findings of the study was that teachers viewed college readiness as involving the effective use of academic resources. This included teaching students how to seek support, find academic resources, and use tools such as writing centers, office hours, and peer networks. For example, Savannah described an important shift in her teaching approach, moving from teacher-provided scaffolds early in her career to teaching students self-sufficiency later: "How can I teach them to create their own sentence starters... their own outlines, their own checklists... because they can't have a pocket me wherever they go?"

This aligns with existing research that stresses the importance of resource utilization for student success in higher education (Conley, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020). Teachers also emphasized self-sufficiency, with Harmony noting that part of college readiness is ensuring students are "prepared even when time is limited," encouraging independence in their learning processes.

Theme 2: Complexity of Thinking

Teachers in this study also emphasized

the development of critical thinking and complexity of thought as key components of college readiness. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of teaching students to engage with complex texts and express their thoughts in increasingly sophisticated ways, and multiple teachers emphasized the importance of skill development over content knowledge. For example, Nina directly stated that "college readiness is more about skill sets than it is about content." Nathan elaborated on these skills, highlighting "strong analytical skills, problem solving, writing, ability to read well" as essential components taught in English classrooms. David similarly described "Critical thinking development, definitely a lot of close reading and developing their style as writers." This theme aligns with previous research that stresses the need for higher-order thinking in college-level reading and writing (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Teachers believed that college readiness involved not only mastering content but also the ability to engage in complex cognitive tasks and navigate the complexity of academic discourse, such as synthesizing multiple sources, constructing evidence-based arguments, questioning underlying assumptions, and adapting writing and reasoning across disciplinary contexts.

Theme 3: Self-Management, Responsibility, and Preparedness

Another central theme was the emphasis on self-management, responsibility, and preparedness, which teachers saw as crucial for students transitioning from high school to college. The study participants stressed that students needed to develop habits that would support their long-term academic success, such as time management, independence, and the ability to manage academic pressure. For example, David noted that while "academic ability plays a role," success in college was more about "independence and ability to take control of your education." This theme aligns with

Conley's (2012) work on college readiness, which highlights the importance of executive functioning and time management skills. Teachers viewed their role as not just helping students achieve academic success but also fostering the personal responsibility and self-sufficiency required for success in higher education.

Theme 4: Multiple Postsecondary Pathways

In response to the changing landscape of postsecondary education, many teachers in this study shifted away from a singular focus on college readiness, advocating for a more inclusive approach that embraces multiple postsecondary pathways. Teachers such as Savannah and David noted the importance of recognizing that not all students will pursue traditional four-year college degrees. This shift reflects an increasing recognition of diverse pathways, including technical education, workforce entry, and other forms of postsecondary education. David, in particular, remarked, "a lot of our kids don't want to go to college, and that's real. We just want to make sure they have a plan." This aligns with research advocating for a broader conception of college readiness that includes preparation for a variety of postsecondary options (Perez et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2020).

Theme 5: Transferable Literacy Skills

Throughout the interviews, teachers expressed the need to focus on transferable literacy skills that students could apply in a range of contexts beyond high school. They underscored the importance of critical thinking, media literacy, and digital literacy. Savannah noted, "especially in today's world with social media, students need to be able to read a complex text and understand it, but more so than that, also question the validity and the reliability." Nathan also emphasized the need for students to develop "multi-modal literacies," which align with the increasing importance of digital and media literacy in modern education (Conley, 2014; Smale, 2020).

These transferable skills are central to preparing students for the rapidly evolving demands of the 21st-century workforce and college environments.

Theme 6: Exposure to Diverse Texts and Perspectives

Exposure to diverse perspectives and texts was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Teachers emphasized the importance of broadening students' literary horizons to prepare them for the diverse and complex readings they would encounter in higher education. David noted that it was important to incorporate "diversity of authors, diversity of experiences," and to "change texts based on who's in front of us." This was echoed by James, who emphasized the need for students to be exposed to "great literature from every corner of the world." The focus on diversity and inclusion in literature aligns with research advocating for a multicultural and multilingual approach to literacy education (Bishop, 1990; Sullivan et al., 2020).

These findings highlight how the teachers in this study conceptualize college readiness as a complex, multidimensional construct that requires not just content knowledge but the development of critical thinking, independence, and adaptability. Teachers emphasized the need for flexibility, student agency, and exposure to diverse perspectives as essential components of preparing students for the challenges of higher education.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with and extend existing scholarship on college readiness by emphasizing its multidimensional nature in high school English classrooms. Teachers conceptualized readiness as a holistic process that includes critical thinking, self-sufficiency, and resource navigation, challenging narrow, test-driven definitions that dominate educational discourse. These insights support a more flexible, student-centered approach that reflects the varied

postsecondary paths students pursue.

Participants emphasized transferable literacy skills, adaptability, and independence as essential for college success. This aligns with research advocating for skills like problem-solving, analysis, and communication across academic and professional contexts (Conley, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020). The emphasis on complexity of thought reflects broader calls to move beyond simplistic assessments toward a more comprehensive understanding of college preparation (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Perez et al., 2021).

The theme of self-management and preparedness reinforces the need to foster independent learning habits. Teachers noted time management, academic resilience, and self-directed learning as crucial for navigating college workloads and unfamiliar academic environments (Conley, 2014; Smale, 2020). This supports an expanded definition of readiness that includes personal and social competencies (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015).

The pathways approach discussed by participants contributes to a more inclusive view of readiness. Acknowledging that not all students pursue traditional college routes, teachers promoted preparation for diverse postsecondary options, challenging the “college-for-all” narrative in favor of approaches that align with students’ strengths and aspirations (Perez et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2020).

Finally, teachers’ emphasis on diverse texts and perspectives supports calls for a culturally responsive curriculum. Exposure to a broad range of authors and genres fosters critical literacy and prepares students to navigate diverse academic and social environments (Bishop, 1990; Sullivan et al., 2020). In doing so, teachers help students build the critical consciousness necessary to engage with the complexities of contemporary life (Kolluri & Tierney, 2018).

Implications for Practice

Systems-Level: Reframing College Readiness Nationally

At a systems level, there is a pressing need to reconceptualize college readiness as a multifaceted, student-centered process that balances academic rigor with transferable skills, adaptability, and critical consciousness. Across national policy and accountability frameworks, readiness continues to be defined primarily through test-based metrics, which fail to capture the complex literacy, identity, and learning processes students must navigate in postsecondary environments. Educational systems should adopt broader, more inclusive models that recognize multiple pathways and forms of postsecondary success, positioning readiness as a developmental and contextual process rather than a fixed benchmark.

State-Level: Reassessment of College Readiness Frameworks

Within this broader shift, state education agencies play a critical role in operationalizing more inclusive definitions of readiness. States should move beyond narrow assessment-driven models and adopt frameworks such as New York’s forthcoming Portraits of a Graduate, which assess student growth across dimensions such as critical thinking, collaboration, and social responsibility. These approaches more accurately reflect the varied ways students apply literacy and prepare for postsecondary success across academic, professional, and civic contexts.

District-Level: Collaborative Curriculum Development

At the district level, school systems should foster collaborative curriculum design initiatives that allow for more cross-sector communication between high school and college faculty. Teachers in this study expressed a desire for collaboration but noted that it is often limited or nonexistent. By creating structured opportunities for cross-institutional dialogue, districts can align expectations for college-level writing and

reading, share best practices for scaffolding literacy skills, and ensure that students are being prepared for the demands of higher education. Structured programs for joint curriculum development, assessment design, and professional learning would help align expectations and support smoother transitions. Including higher education faculty in professional learning communities can further promote shared ownership of student success.

School-Level: Diverse Text and Student Agency

At the school level, deeply understanding students is essential for designing inclusive, responsive curricula. Teachers in this study highlighted the role of student voice, choice, and cultural relevance in fostering college readiness. Implementing student-centered practices, such as interest surveys, literature circles, and culturally relevant texts, can create more engaging, personalized learning environments that promote student ownership of learning. Exposure to texts spanning diverse genres, cultures, and perspectives builds critical thinking and prepares students for postsecondary literacy demands. Schools should also incorporate multimodal text sets including print, digital media, podcasts, and visual texts to support varied learning styles and reflect the range of literacies students will encounter in college and beyond.

Classroom-Level: Emphasizing Transferable Skills and Critical Thinking

At the classroom level, teachers should continue to prioritize transferable literacy skills that can be applied across various contexts, whether in college, the workforce, or civic engagement. This includes not only traditional reading and writing skills but also critical thinking, media literacy, and the ability to engage with complex, multimodal texts. Teachers in this study also noted the importance of fostering students' self-sufficiency by gradually shifting responsibility for their learning from teacher-led scaffolding

to independent, student-driven practices. This can be achieved through regular opportunities for self-reflection, peer feedback, and metacognitive exercises that encourage students to assess their own work and progress.

Implications for Research

Pathways Approach and Longitudinal Studies

Future research should explore the benefits of adopting a broader "pathways approach" to postsecondary preparation, which acknowledges multiple routes beyond the traditional four-year college model. Longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes across community colleges, technical programs, and workforce entry would provide deeper insights into how different high school readiness models impact long-term success. Qualitative studies centered on students' lived experiences in these settings could inform more flexible and responsive curriculum practices.

Evaluating the Role of External Influence on Curriculum

Finally, further research should explore the impact of external forces, such as College Board offerings, AP courses, and other standardized assessments, on high school English curricula. This includes investigating the effectiveness of various college readiness programs and comparing them to frameworks that prioritize civic engagement and critical consciousness. Content analysis of College Board curricula and youth participatory action research could provide valuable data on how external mandates influence teaching practices and curriculum design.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. The small sample of eight New York City English teachers may not reflect the perspectives of educators in other regions, particularly suburban or rural areas with different contexts. While phenomenology prioritizes depth, the

findings may not be widely generalizable. Conducted during a time of policy shifts, the study's focus on standardized testing may lose relevance as New York reconsiders Regents exams. Although the researcher used reflexivity and member checking, their teaching background may have influenced interpretation.

Future research should include more diverse samples across geographic and institutional settings. Longitudinal studies tracking students from high school through college could illuminate the long-term impact of literacy instruction on persistence and success. Investigating collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educators may reveal strategies for better curricular alignment. Additional studies should examine how non-academic factors, such as resilience, social capital, and identity, affect readiness. Finally, centering student perspectives would deepen understanding of how instructional practices align with actual student needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need to reconceptualize college readiness as a dynamic, student-centered process that prioritizes critical thinking, adaptability, and self-sufficiency over narrow, test-driven metrics. Teachers in this study demonstrate a commitment to preparing students for diverse

postsecondary pathways by fostering transferable skills and providing flexible, culturally responsive instruction. The findings suggest that educational systems must move beyond rigid definitions of readiness and engage in cross-sector collaboration to ensure alignment between high school and college expectations, ultimately equipping students with the skills they need for success in an evolving world.

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Exploring the Experiences of Students with Reading Difficulties in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Reading difficulties often continue into adulthood and are being seen at increasing rates in higher education. This study explores the academic experiences of higher-education students (N=51) with reading difficulties at a small liberal arts university. Through qualitative analysis of survey responses, five themes emerged: challenges in reading and learning, effective academic and learning strategies, qualities of supportive professors, impactful personal qualities, and the dual role of technology. The key findings of the study indicate that although participants experienced persistent difficulties with reading comprehension and decoding, they were able to counter these challenges using study skills, self-advocacy, and through the impact of their individual personal strengths. The use of technology as a learning tool was sometimes viewed as helpful but also could hinder efforts. The study reveals a critical need for better awareness and support for students with reading challenges in higher education, suggesting a direction for future research and institutional improvements.

Keywords: reading; reading difficulties; higher education

Introduction

Difficulties with reading may be one of the greatest barriers to successfully pursuing a degree in higher education (Newman, et al, 2011; Tops et al., 2020). Students may encounter dense theory-laden texts, extended online reading, independent research, and be required to engage in multiple modalities of learning. Students with a history of reading difficulties, therefore, often need to engage in strategies and coping mechanisms that they have developed on an individual basis throughout their years of schooling to achieve academic success (Richardson, 2021). For many learners, however, reading remains a persistent challenge well into adulthood (Wilson & Lesaux, 2001). Difficulties with reading, whether stemming from diagnosed learning disorders such as dyslexia, undiagnosed phonological/decoding deficits, language background issues, attentional or executive-function difficulties, limited prior literacy instruction, or digital-reading fatigue, can represent one of the greatest barriers to academic success in higher education. At colleges and universities, students who self-identify as having reading difficulties often rely on coping strategies and compensatory skills they developed throughout earlier schooling. While some enter with formal diagnoses and accommodations, others arrive with lingering, unidentified challenges in comprehension, decoding, or academic reading fluency. The rising awareness of the neurobiological nature of some reading disorders, alongside increasing diversity in student populations and instructional formats, highlights the need to understand reading challenges within a broader, inclusive framework that acknowledges multiple pathways to difficulty and success (Richardson, 2021).

To ensure more equitable academic outcomes, institutions of higher education must better address the diverse profiles of readers who struggle with reading. This involves understanding not only the cognitive

underpinnings of reading but also the social, emotional, and environmental factors that influence how students engage, persist, and achieve. Although reading difficulties have been extensively studied in children and adolescents, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these challenges manifest for adult learners navigating the complex demands of higher-education settings (Del Tufo & Earle, 2020). Exploring the lived experiences of such students may provide insights that inform instructional practices, disability services, and institutional policies aimed at promoting academic inclusion.

Profiles and Sources of Reading Difficulties

The specific nature and origin of reading difficulties vary widely among learners. The Simple View of Reading (SVR) proposed by Gough & Tunmer (1986) remains useful as a model: it defines reading comprehension as the product of word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension. According to this framework, difficulties may arise from deficits in decoding (as often seen in dyslexia), in language comprehension (as seen in specific language impairments or second-language challenges), or a combination of both. Within the higher education context, therefore, students may experience reading difficulties for a range of reasons—some developmental, others experiential or situational. For example, many students who were never formally identified with dyslexia may continue to display persistent deficits in phonological processing, decoding, and reading fluency (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020; Roitsch & Watson, 2019). Others may struggle because of attention- or executive-function issues (especially in contexts of independent academic reading), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) being one relevant condition (Green, 2012; Sedgwick-Müller et al., 2022). Some learners arrive from varied educational or language backgrounds (e.g., as multilingual students or from under-resourced schools) resulting in weaker prior literacy instruction or

limited reading habits (Bergman, 2024). A meta-analysis of university-student reading comprehension found that only about 22% reached optimal levels of critical or organizational comprehension (de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas, 2021), underscoring that reading difficulties in higher education are not confined to formally diagnosed populations.

Adult-reading literature further highlights heterogeneity among struggling readers: latent class analyses of adults in literacy programs found distinct sub-groups (e.g., “weak decoders,” “weak language comprehenders”) whose difficulties cannot be reduced to a single diagnostic label (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). Thus, the term reading difficulties (rather than dyslexia alone) helps capture the broader array of challenges faced by higher-education students. The prevalence of these challenges remains hard to estimate accurately—under-identification is a notable issue (Wagner et al., 2020). Many students arrive at college without formal diagnosis or accommodations, which may contribute to disparities in enrollment, retention, and completion. For instance, SRI (originally known as Stanford Research International) National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 found that although 60% of students with learning disorders pursued post-secondary education, only about 34% earned a degree, compared to 56% of students without reading difficulties (Newman et al., 2011).

Psychology, Social and Contextual Factors

Beyond cognitive skill deficits, reading difficulties in adulthood (and in higher education) intertwine with psychological, social, and contextual dimensions. Students who read more slowly or inefficiently often report higher levels of stress, test anxiety, and lower academic self-esteem (Nelson et al., 2019; Lithari, 2019). They may perceive themselves as “behind” or “less smart” compared to peers, which may reinforce avoidance behaviours or academic disengagement. Social factors, such as stigma, stereotype threat, or faculty misconceptions,

also play a role (Pino & Mortari, 2014; Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005). Faculty preparedness for reading difficulties is uneven: for example, many faculty members in colleges hold misconceptions about dyslexia and reading disorders (Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005). In addition, the shift toward digital reading, online coursework, and fully virtual learning environments introduces new challenges, for instance reading on screens has been shown to reduce comprehension in some contexts (Horning, 2022). Technology can serve as a double-edged sword: while assistive tools (text-to-speech, enlarged fonts) can provide support, the demands of navigating digital platforms, skimming habits, and multitasking may exacerbate reading challenges.

The Current Study

Currently, there is little information on the distinct challenges faced by students with reading difficulties and learning disorders in higher education (Del Tufo, & Earle, 2020). The many barriers to successfully navigating the world of higher education deserves investigation to uncover the factors that pose the greatest challenges and those that facilitate success. The objective of the current study is to describe the experiences of students at a small liberal arts university who have reading difficulties for the purpose of identifying factors which facilitate academic success as well as those that impede the ability to thrive in the setting of higher education. The authors define academic success as the ability to attain academic goals as they relate to maintaining the status of a student in good standing at their college or university with the goal of program completion. Two research questions were addressed for this purpose: (1) What specific reading or learning strategies do students with reading difficulties in higher education use to facilitate academic success in their courses, and (2) What specific challenges do students with reading difficulties in higher education face that interfere with their ability to succeed academically? Exploring the experiences of

students who identify as having difficulty reading may shed light on strategies employed that promote success and elements that create challenges. By identifying factors that either contribute to or interfere with academic success, steps may be taken in the future at the institutional level to address the specific needs of the growing population of students with reading difficulties seeking degrees at colleges and universities.

Methods

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the lived experiences of students in higher education who self-identified as having reading difficulties. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the focus on understanding the meanings participants assign to their academic experiences, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. Open-ended survey responses were used to capture a range of student perspectives while allowing participants to describe their challenges and strategies in their own words. This approach aligns with the constructivist and phenomenological underpinnings of the study, which emphasize participant meaning-making and subjective experience rather than numerical count, comparison, or generalization. More specifically, this study draws on principles of interpretive phenomenology in qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009), emphasizing how participants make meaning of their experiences within context rather than seeking a single essential structure of those experiences. The intent was not to quantify prevalence or outcomes but to provide a rich description of the social, emotional, and academic contexts in which students navigate reading difficulties in higher education.

Ethics and Recruitment

Participants for the current study were

recruited at a small liberal arts university in the northeastern United States. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study procedures prior to data collection, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Flyers were posted around common spaces of the university and emails were distributed through institutional listservs to recruit participants who self-identified as individuals experiencing reading challenges while enrolled as students. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically prior to survey access. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; no identifying information was collected, and responses were stored securely on password-protected servers.

Recruitment yielded a total sample ($N = 51$), including both graduate and undergraduate students. The demographic information is presented in Table 1. Eighty-eight percent ($n = 45$) of the participants were female and nearly 75% ($n = 38$) were Caucasian. Twenty-four percent ($n = 12$) reported being fluent in another language. Thirty-five percent ($n = 18$) reported having an Individualized Education Program (IEP) before college, while only 13% ($n = 7$) reported utilizing university accessibility services.

Table 1. Demographic Results

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	45	9.80%
Female	5	88.24%
Non-Binary	1	1.96
Number of College Credits		
1 to 30	1	1.96%
31-60	4	7.84%
61-90	7	13.73%
90-120	25	49.02%
Graduate student	14	27.45%
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	38	74.51%
African American	1	1.96%
Native American	1	1.96%
Hispanic	5	9.80%
Two or more	4	7.84%
Other	2	3.02%
Parent Level of Education		
High School	5	9.80%
Some College	22	43.14%

Bachelors Degree	12	23.53%
Master Degree	9	17.65%
Prefer not to Say	3	5.88%
Fluent in Other Languages		
Yes	12	23.53%
No	39	76.47%
Had an IEP before College		
Yes	18	35.29%
No	33	64.71%
GPA		
2.1-2.9	4	7.84%
3.0-3.9	41	80.39%
4..0	6	11.76%

Theoretical Framework

The present study was grounded in a constructivist and phenomenological framework, which guided both the research design and analytic approach. A constructivist perspective assumes that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through participants' lived experiences and the researchers' interpretive lens. This framework was particularly appropriate given the study's focus on how students with reading difficulties make sense of their academic lives within higher education contexts. In line with this perspective, the analytic process emphasized patterns of shared meaning rather than frequency counts alone. The researchers drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis and were guided by an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological orientation, emphasizing the interpretation of meaning within context rather than the

identification of a single essential structure of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This theoretical stance recognizes the complexity of reading difficulties as situated not only within the individual learner but also within broader educational, social, and emotional systems that shape student outcomes.

Researcher Positionality

Recognizing the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry, both researchers engaged in explicit reflection regarding their professional and personal lenses throughout the research process. The lead author and researcher is a literacy specialist and educator with more than thirty-five years of experience in elementary, secondary, and higher education. The second researcher is a licensed psychologist and pediatric neuropsychologist with over a decade of clinical experience working with children, adolescents, and young adults who present

with developmental, learning, and attentional challenges. Both authors currently serve as faculty members in higher education. Their combined expertise informed the development of the survey instrument, the interpretation of student responses, and the understanding of academic and psychosocial factors related to literacy in adulthood. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to acknowledge and bracket potential biases, particularly regarding expectations about student motivation, instructional effectiveness, and faculty support systems.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interested participants were sent an email with a link to a Qualtrics survey. Participants first completed a brief set of demographic questions (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and language background) followed by five open-ended questions designed to elicit personal experiences. The questions were intentionally broad and non-leading in nature, encouraging participants to reflect freely on their experiences across educational settings. The open-ended questions were designed to capture several broad domains of student experience, including (a) perceived challenges related to reading and writing, (b) strategies and supports that facilitate academic success, (c) qualities of professors that support learning, (d) individual characteristics that contribute to persistence and success, and (e) features of the learning environment that influence academic engagement. These domains guided initial coding and contributed to the development of the final themes. Data were exported directly from Qualtrics and organized manually for analysis. Each researcher independently coded responses into categories and subcategories derived directly and inductively from the raw data. Codes were then compared, and each

response was reviewed until a final coding scheme was developed and agreed upon by consensus. Basic descriptive and frequency data were used to examine demographic results.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, multiple qualitative validation strategies were employed. Analyst triangulation was used, with both researchers independently coding the data and reconciling differences collaboratively. Reflexive memos documented analytic decisions and theoretical reflections across stages of coding. Thick description ensured that participant quotations represented the diversity of experiences in the data. Audit trails were maintained to provide transparency of analytic steps, including codebook development and theme refinement. Finally, to enhance confirmability, an independent colleague with expertise in qualitative methodology reviewed the final themes to ensure they were grounded in the participants' words and experiences. Collectively, these procedures strengthened the methodological rigor of the study and reinforced confidence in the validity and authenticity of its interpretations.

Results

Based on the analysis and coding of the written responses to survey questions, five main themes emerged: reading and learning challenges, academic and learning strategies/compensatory skills, qualities of professors, personal qualities, and technology. In addition, 17 subcategories were also identified. Categories and subcategories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Content Analysis Results

Main Theme	Subtheme	Quotes / Examples
Reading and Learning Challenges	Comprehension	“Reading comprehension was my biggest challenge. When I was younger, I just never knew what I was reading.” “Understanding what I was trying to read was hard when I had to focus more on knowing what I was pronouncing and what exactly the words I was reading was.”
	Needing more time	“It takes me longer to read passages.” “I would always fall behind or take longer to complete the work.” “I know what I’m doing but it takes me a bit longer than the average person.”
Academic and Learning Strategies	Self-Advocacy	“Asking a ton of questions and having things explained in great detail” “reading out loud” “I may need to have someone else read the text to me”
	Study Skills	“It can be challenging to keep up with the note taking from lectures or Powerpoints”
	Time Management	“Challenges: I still struggle when I’m tired or pressed for time”
	Class Size	“Small class size, a professor who understands school is challenging, nonjudgmental peers & professors”
	Class Organization	“ I like a class that feels like a community, where students collaborate and are in the moment of the classroom”
Technology	Difficulty with virtual	"I don't know how to explain this one but I have trouble reading things virtually. Or I did for the longest time."
	Helps with accommodations	"I also couldn't use a scantron because I couldn't see it and it took me too long to do, so I was allowed to just circle my answers in the test booklet. I got all of my test booklets and notes in a size 20 pt font which I feel helped significantly with my reading."
Professor Qualities	Understanding	“Most of my professors were open to accommodating my disabilities with what ever I needed”

	Caring	“Communicative and caring:
	Patient	“Patient, understanding, helpful, kind, & accessible”
	Negative Qualities	“one professor that had blacked out her slides so that we would have to pay attention during class and that was really hard for me to see the board” “Personally, my professors were no help”
Personal Qualities	Hard working	“Hard working, driven”
	Determined	“Determination and willingness to learn are some of the qualities that have helped in college”
	Work ethic	“Strong willed” “Dedicated” “Hard-working” “Driven”
	Organized	“I am independent, organized, dedicated, hard working, and willing to ask for when I need it”
Technology	Difficulty with virtual	“I don't know how to explain this one, but I have trouble reading things virtually. Or I did for the longest time.”
	Help with accommodations	“I also couldn't use a Scantron because I couldn't see it and it took me too long to do so I was allowed to just circle my answers in the test booklet. I got all of my test, booklets and notes in a size 20 PT font which I feel significantly helped my reading.”

Theme 1: Reading and Learning Challenges

The challenges participants mentioned most often related to difficulties with reading and learning with two subcategories which focused on reading comprehension and the need for more time. Participants referred to the difficulty with comprehension as a long-term challenge, persisting from childhood to the present. For example, one participant stated, “Reading comprehension was my biggest

challenge. When I was younger, I just never knew what I was reading.” Although the focus of the challenge was on comprehension, there were also references to problems with decoding and the ways this complicated reading the level of texts required in higher education. “Understanding what I was trying to read was hard when I had to focus more on knowing what I was pronouncing and what exactly the words I was reading was.” This response emphasizes the impact of a lack of

skills in phonics, which is necessary for the decoding of the more complex words found in textbooks. Difficulties decoding and word recognition is a descriptor in the profile for individuals diagnosed with dyslexia.

The theme of time as a challenge was noted frequently by participants. The need for additional time to complete tasks is a hallmark of dyslexia. Participants made comments such as:

"It takes me longer to read passages."

"I would always fall behind or take longer to complete the work."

"I know what I'm doing but it takes me a bit longer than the average person."

These responses highlight the participants' struggles with reading comprehension and reading rate which relates to fluency; two essential components of the reading process. Readers must be proficient at decoding the words on the page at an appropriate rate to ensure fluent reading and thereby comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). In higher education, the combined difficulty related to reading comprehension and the need for additional time can pose a substantial barrier to academic achievement and a topic of concern for students with reading challenges.

Theme 2: Academic and Learning Strategies

The second theme focused on a variety of academic and learning strategies that students utilized to facilitate academic success which were divided into five subcategories. The subcategories included: self-advocacy, study skills, time management, class size, and class organization. Study participants demonstrated an awareness of their own learning needs and a willingness to advocate for themselves. For example, one participant noted "asking a ton of questions and having things explained in great detail" as an effective strategy to support academic success. Other strategies reported included, "I may need to have someone else read the text to me" or "reading out loud". Participants also mentioned a variety of study skills utilized such

as, "make review sheets myself". Many referred to basic study skills including working on organization, using a planner, highlighters, note taking, flash cards, repetition, annotation, and power points.

An awareness of the need to address issues related to time management is a strategy which supported students who demonstrated this self-knowledge in comments like, "I still struggle when I'm tired and pressed for time" and utilized time management strategies such as using a planner. Students were also aware of the learning environment that was most conducive to their own success and seemed to seek out these settings. For example, students preferred a "small class size, a professor who understands school is challenging, non-judgmental peers and professors." Another preference regarding class organization was reflected in the following comment, "I like a class that feels like a community, where students collaborate..." The primary academic and learning strategies employed focused on traditional study habits and advocating for help. Specific kinds of help came in the form as assistance from the professor or a peer, and in an environment identified as most conducive for learning.

Theme 3: Professor Qualities

The qualities of professors play a significant role in students' academic success. Participants frequently used the descriptors "understanding, helpful, and caring" to identify the characteristics of professors who make a significant difference in their learning experience. One participant reported, "Most of my professors were open to accommodating my disabilities with whatever I needed." Professors who supported the learning of students were also described as "communicative and caring," and "patient, understanding, helpful, kind, and accessible." Negative qualities possessed by faculty members were also noted with one participant stating, "Personally, my professors were no help." The importance of the personal traits possessed by the professor was conveyed as a

key factor in student success. It seems important to note that the emphasis in describing professors focused on personal qualities and not on pedagogy or instructional factors.

Theme 4: Personal Qualities

Participants cited both positive and negative personal qualities as factors in their academic performance. Four subcategories were identified: determination, work ethic, organization, and weaknesses. Participants were cognizant of the qualities they possessed that interfered with learning. Some comments that indicate this are directly related to reading as one participant stated that they had a “lower reading level than peers” or “I find I read slower than my colleagues,” and reported “feeling behind and not as smart as my peers.” Participants also divulged more personal negative traits that complicate the learning process such as, “lack of motivation” or “didn’t have the drive.” However, participants also described themselves with such positive terms as “strong-willed,” “dedicated,” “hard-working,” and “driven” and cited these qualities as reasons for success. Participants stated, “Determination and willingness to learn are some of the qualities that helped in college,” and “I am independent, dedicated, hard-working, organized, and willing to ask for help when I need it.” Despite their challenges, the participants show a strong sense of determination and work ethic. They are driven and willing to learn, qualities that are instrumental in overcoming academic challenges and achieving success.

Theme 5: Technology

However, after one semester of SWI Participants' relationships with technology are a bit mixed. Participant's responses revealed two contradictory subcategories on the theme of technology: difficulty with virtual learning experiences evident in the response “...I have trouble reading things virtually...” and the second subcategory, helpful with accommodations, “...I got all my test booklets

and noted in a size 20-point font which I feel helped significantly with my reading.” On one hand, some struggle with virtual learning, finding it more difficult than in-person learning. On the other hand, technology can also be a tool for accommodation, such as increasing font size to improve reading comprehension. This suggests that technology can both assist and hinder learning, and its effectiveness may largely depend on how it's utilized in the learning environment. It shows the potential of technology in aiding students with disabilities, but also underscores the need for careful implementation and consideration of individual learning styles.

Discussion

Findings and Implications

The results of the current study provide insights into the experiences of students with reading difficulties at a small liberal arts university with five themes emerging. The themes include reading and learning challenges, academic and learning strategies/compensatory skills, qualities of professors, personal qualities, and technology. This study aligns with previous research in several ways. According to Nergård-Nilssen and Hulme (2014), adults can assess their literacy skills accurately, therefore, participants who reported themselves as having reading difficulties may have undiagnosed dyslexia. Dyslexia is a difficulty with reading that has a neurobiological basis, specifically with deficits in the phonological processing of language. This results in difficulty with decoding text which impacts accuracy and fluency as well as comprehension; however, the difficulty reading is not associated with a deficit in intelligence. Therefore, individuals with dyslexia can succeed in higher education settings (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020; Roitsch & Watson, 2019). This study highlights the lack of awareness of all elements of the reading difficulty. Although participants reported challenges with elements of reading including decoding, fluency, and comprehension, no

participant sought support for these difficulties. The International Dyslexia Association recommends that adults with dyslexia receive skilled instruction in deficit areas of reading and writing (International Dyslexia Association, 2020). This raises the question if institutions of higher education should consider providing targeted instruction in specific areas such as decoding for students who might benefit.

Previous studies referred to the identification and acceptance of the presence of dyslexia and the role of the accessibility office as a positive support for students and a factor in the successful outcomes reported (Shaywitz et al., 2020); however, the literature also reflects a greater emphasis on the use of compensatory skills and personal character traits to offset the challenges caused by difficulties with reading (Richardson, 2021) and at times questions that the act of self-identifying as having a learning challenge may do more harm than good as a result of the preconceptions held by some in higher education. Different institutions of higher education appear to address the issue in different ways. The current study reflects mixed attitudes towards self-identification and use of campus resources such as the accessibility office. While some participants in the current study sought formal means of support (13.78%) the majority did not (86.27%) indicating that most students who identify as having a reading difficulty do not seek institutional support. This implies that there is work to be done to increase awareness of the origins of reading difficulties and effective approaches to providing the support that facilitates success.

The role of the learning environment in previous studies emerged as a key factor in student success (Richardson, 2021; Shaywitz, al., 2020). The current study echoes these findings and highlights the differences between the ways colleges and universities address the needs of students with reading difficulties. Participants benefited from small class settings and faculty that possessed specific positive

character traits conducive to understanding academic challenges. The results imply that it would be beneficial to take steps to address changes in the learning environment. One approach would focus on efforts to increase awareness of the neurobiological nature of dyslexia to both faculty and students to remove the stigma often associated with this specific learning disability. This action may promote an increase in self-advocacy, an important factor in student success. The New York State Department of Education provides guidance for improving results for students with learning disabilities (New York State Education Department). The first item on this report calls for students to engage in self-advocacy in determining their own educational plans. A deeper understanding of their struggles with reading and learning will enable students to advocate for themselves in a more effective and comprehensive manner.

Once students increase their levels of self-advocacy and seek support from the accessibility office, efforts may be made to provide targeted intervention in specific reading skills that may not have been addressed in previous schooling. The current study indicates that participants who identified as having reading difficulties did not have the benefit of specific support to address their learning issues. Support of this nature may very well increase the level of academic success in higher education. Instead, students primarily relied on their own positive character traits such as determination, diligence, and self-motivation or basic study skills such as time management, organization, and annotating texts. The findings of the present study indicate that personal qualities and traits in both students and professors appeared to be as important as academic and environmental stimuli.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this study should be considered within the context of several limitations. The current study involved a relatively small sample from the population of

one small liberal arts university. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from the participants to identify reading difficulties introduces a potential bias. The absence of a formal diagnostic process or testing means that the study's population may include a wide range of reading challenges, not strictly dyslexia, but other areas that may also impact someone's academic performance that may affect their perception of their reading skills. Research by Wagner et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of precise diagnostic criteria to accurately identify the needs of students with dyslexia in higher education. The data collection method, an electronic survey requiring written responses, may not have been the most accessible or effective means of gathering in-depth insights from individuals who experience reading difficulties (or who may have challenges with written expression). The brevity of responses suggests that alternative methods, such as oral interviews or interactive sessions, might yield more comprehensive data. Del Tufo & Earle (2020) have pointed out that diverse methods of data

collection can accommodate the varying strengths of individuals with dyslexia, potentially enriching the data quality.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that despite the inherent challenges, individuals with reading difficulties can succeed in the setting of higher education. Study participants reported a reliance on positive personal character traits and the positive character traits of professors; however, few reported utilizing the accessibility office for academic support. This is surprising considering a main concern reported by participants was the need for additional time to complete assignments, a common accommodation provided by the accessibility office. These findings should be considered when planning to address the needs of the growing number of students with reading difficulties entering higher education to provide needed support and increase academic achievement.

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A Book Review

*Osborn, J. (2015). Community
Colleges and First-Generation
Students: Academic Discourse in
the Writing Classroom.
Palgrave Macmillan*

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Jennifer Osborn's *Community Colleges and First-Generation Students: Academic Discourse in the Writing Classroom* examines how academic discourse shapes first-generation students' sense of belonging in a community college composition course. Although published nearly a decade ago, Osborn's book remains highly relevant for English faculty in two-year colleges, where first-generation students are still frequently framed through deficit-oriented assumptions about language, preparedness, and academic identity; recent research shows that higher education institutions continue to describe first-generation students in terms of perceived shortcomings rather than systemic barriers (Allen-McCombs, 2025; LeMire et al., 2025). Osborn's (2015) study encourages instructors to reconsider how everyday pedagogical choices signal who belongs in the classroom and whose voices are valued.

The study is situated in a first-year composition course at a community college within the California Community Colleges system (Osborn, 2015). Osborn (2015) focuses on ten self-identified first-generation students from a class of twenty-six and examines how they interpreted their writing experiences and interactions with their instructor, Ms. Randall. Most participants were students of color and multilingual learners, though one student identified as a low-income White student (Osborn, 2015). Drawing on classroom observations, syllabus analysis, and student writing samples, Osborn (2015) offers a qualitative account of how institutional language practices shape students' academic self-concepts. Rather than isolating variables, the book adopts an interpretive approach that mirrors the reflective inquiry many composition instructors already engage in.

At the center of Osborn's argument is the concept of academic discourse, which she defines as "an attempt at a unitary language within the academy, an attempt at a system of linguistic norms within this sphere of communication" (Osborn, 2015, p. 15).

This definition is especially meaningful in two-year college contexts, where composition courses often function as students' primary introduction to academic culture and institutional expectations, particularly for first-generation learners navigating unfamiliar academic norms for the first time (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020, p. 140; Ricks & Warren, 2021, pp. 1–15). Osborn (2015) argues that language operates as more than a tool for assessment; it communicates institutional values that can either affirm or marginalize students' identities. In this sense, academic discourse becomes a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes whether students see themselves as legitimate members of the academic community (Osborn, 2015).

To examine these dynamics, Osborn draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of speech genres and ideological becoming. Bakhtin (1981) describes speech genres as "our speech cast in forms generic to the communities within which we are using the language" (p. 15). Osborn (2015) uses this framework to show how students navigate the tension between everyday language practices and academic expectations. She demonstrates that students often framed their writing to align with what they perceived as the instructor's preferences, even when doing so required distancing themselves from personal, cultural, or linguistic experiences (Osborn, 2015). Academic writing in the course was consistently described as formal, grammatically correct, and detached, which signaled to students that their lived experiences did not belong in their academic work (Osborn, 2015).

This finding will resonate with instructors in two-year colleges who teach students balancing multiple identities while learning academic conventions. Osborn (2015) does not argue against teaching academic forms. Instead, she cautions that narrow definitions of academic writing can unintentionally limit students' opportunities to see their identities as intellectually valuable.

When instructors adopt a didactic view of academic discourse, students may interpret addressivity as requiring the removal of social identity in order to succeed (Osborn, 2015). As a result, students' ideological becoming is shaped by embarrassment, exclusion, and fear rather than confidence or intellectual agency (Bakhtin, 1981; Osborn, 2015).

Osborn (2015) extends this analysis through Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic domination, which foregrounds the role of power in shaping language use. Whereas Bakhtin (1981) explains how writers move between linguistic contexts, Bourdieu (1991) accounts for why certain forms of language carry institutional authority. Osborn (2015) shows that students consciously adjusted their writing and classroom speech to conform to dominant norms, recognizing that deviation could be interpreted as deficiency. This framework is particularly effective in a community college setting, where students are often acutely aware of how their language choices are evaluated (Grabsch et al., 2024).

Through close analysis of student writing and classroom interactions, Osborn (2015) illustrates how symbolic domination operates subtly. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1991) assertion that educational systems negate non-dominant linguistic forms by reducing them to what is deemed "incorrect" (p.20), Osborn (2015) demonstrates how instructors hold centralized power to legitimize or delegitimize students' identities through language (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 20; Osborn, 2015). Students understood that their linguistic backgrounds and first-generation status were viewed as obstacles rather than resources. In response, they adopted writing practices that minimized traces of multilingualism or cultural specificity in order to align with an Americanized perception of proper English (Osborn, 2015).

Norman Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis provides the framework that unifies these observations. Osborn (2015) describes this approach as one that

examines how "naturalized" ideologies operate within institutional settings and asks "what orders of discourse are naturalized in the setting, how, and by whom" (p. 25). Using this lens, she argues that students' social and linguistic resources were rarely treated as opportunities for reciprocal learning. In chapter six, Osborn (2015) concludes that students' "unique social, cultural, and linguistic contributions were not seen as opportunity for transformative education, transformative for both students and institutions" (p. 125). When students cannot connect their identities to academic work, both instructors and students lose the chance to learn alongside one another.

The book does have limitations. Although Osborn (2015) repeatedly emphasizes the intersectionality of first-generation students' experiences, the concept is not consistently defined. First-generation status is central to the study, yet its relationship to race, language, and class is not always clearly articulated. The frequent invocation of intersectionality without definitional grounding weakens the theoretical precision of the analysis. Given the prominence of first-generation students in two-year colleges, a clearer articulation of how first-generation identity functions within broader systems of inequality would strengthen the book's contribution.

Despite this limitation, *Community Colleges and First-Generation Students* remains a valuable text for instructors and scholars of two-year college English. Its greatest strength lies in prompting faculty to reconsider how definitions of academic writing may reinforce deficit perspectives. Although published in 2015, the book continues to speak to current concerns, as first-generation students are still frequently framed through narratives of lack rather than potential. Osborn's (2015) work reminds instructors that language choices in syllabi, assignments, and feedback have lasting consequences for student belonging.

For readers of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, this book offers both

a critical lens and a pedagogical challenge: to examine how classroom discourse can either constrain or expand students' sense of possibility. Osborn (2015) ultimately calls for

writing classrooms where academic rigor and student identity are not positioned in opposition but allowed to inform one another.

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