

Cross-Sector Understanding of the Difference between College Ready Reading and College Level Reading (Cohort F)

About Us

Cohort F members include: Justin Young (EWU), Angela Rasmussen (SCC), Lori Inman (Mead School District) and Michelle Lewis (Spokane Public Schools). The two higher education members teach ELA courses and are department heads. One teaches and leads at Spokane Community College and the other has a similar role at Eastern Washington University. The two high school members currently do not teach in the classroom, but they train teachers and have access to students in the classroom. One is at Spokane Public Schools in administration and the other is at the Mead School District in Learning Services. This cohort has a strong blend of high school, community college and four-year university perspectives.

Justin Young is an Associate Professor of English at Eastern Washington University where he directs the English Composition Program and the Writers' Center. Justin trains and supervises faculty and staff in the Composition Program & Writers' Center; he also teaches composition theory and pedagogy courses for the graduate teaching assistants who teach in the program. Justin is involved in national and state-level efforts to improve student success in the transition to college, and his research focuses on how writing instruction and writing center support can better prepare students across the P-16 continuum to communicate effectively in both print and in digital environments. Forthcoming publications include a chapter in the book *What is College Reading? Exploring Reading in Every Discipline*, which focuses on college-level reading instruction in relation to ongoing debates over literacy instruction at the P-12 level.

Lori Inman is a Secondary Curriculum Specialist for the Mead School District where she conducts professional development on standards alignment, classroom best practices, formative assessment development, and data-driven instruction. Lori was a high school English teacher for 22 years before moving into teacher training. Her work at the district, regional and state level led to her involvement in the College Sparks successful transitions project where she contributed to the design of a toolkit item that provides a protocol for determining the components of college-ready reading and college-level reading.

Angela Rasmussen teaches English at Spokane Community College. She has taught college-level English for twenty-five years, serving the college as department chair, co-director of the Hagan Foundation Center for the Humanities, and most recently, as coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Center. Her work with non-traditional and underprepared students has contributed to her professional focus on student access, and this work has led to many conference presentations and publications. Recently, this interest has led to her participation with several cross-sector grants that involve conversations with high school and university instructors. The shift from focusing on two-year students to **all** students as they transition from high school to successful college completion has reinvigorated her classroom practices.

Michelle Lewis has taught middle and high school English and Social Studies in Washington State throughout her 20-year career in education. Currently, Michelle is the Secondary Curriculum Coordinator for English, social studies and libraries at Spokane Public Schools. In addition to her work for Spokane Public Schools, she was a Content Development Consultant for the 2014 Springboard ELA revision where she collaborated with the writing team as a writer and reviewer of both the instructional units and ancillary materials for the College Board. She is

interested in the effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards in preparing students for successful transitions to post-secondary pursuits.

What significant problem of practice did your intervention target?

Our **problem of practice** began with the following concepts (see white paper):

- Both faculty and students lack a clear definition and understanding of the unique challenges of college-level reading.
- Students lack understanding of the gaps in reading skills they bring to college.
- Students do not recognize the difference between reading fluency and comprehension and the essential components of college-level reading.
- Instructors across sectors may fail to recognize gaps in student preparedness.

Through dialogue about these concepts and related research, we have developed a **problem of practice** that promotes collaborative discussion among high school teachers and college instructors about the differences between the skills that high students should have when they arrive in college, as well as the skills they need when they begin their specific post-secondary studies. Through this process, teachers will develop a shared definition of college-ready and college-level reading.

Problem of Practice:

Develop a shared, cross-sector understanding of the difference between college-ready reading and college-level reading in order to ensure that expectations and instructional approaches are aligned.

Research (white paper) connects college-level reading abilities to other key areas of college success, including:

- Information literacy
- Writing ability
- Critical thinking
- Synthesis of knowledge across disciplines
- Sustained critical inquiry

The conclusion could be that high school teachers should move their students toward demonstrating college-ready reading by graduation, while college instructors should move their students toward success with college-level reading. This cannot happen unless and until all teachers and instructors become part of the conversation regarding the difference between the two and collaborate to develop an agreed upon definition that will affect instructional practices.

Our secondary problem of practice developed as we moved forward in our implementation and data-gathering phase. It became clear that once teachers reached a definition of college-ready and college-level reading, application to student learning was necessary in order to fulfill the requirement that high school students attend college prepared to face the challenges of reading more complex texts.

How does CCSS relate to this problem?

Prior to the Common Core State Standards, Washington State's Language Arts Standards were aligned with Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) up to grade 10. Teachers and districts found themselves challenged to fill in a two-year gap for juniors and seniors using a variety of methods ranging from annual meetings with local colleges to using national standard sets like those provided by the College Board. We now have a fully articulated K-12 set of standards with specific skills that progress in complexity at each grade level. This means administrators, teachers, parents, and students understand the expectations for reading, writing, speaking and listening and language skills.

The new challenge with the CCSS comes with secondary schools fulfilling the promise of the career and college readiness standards by increasing their expectations for student achievement in reading and writing. One step in addressing this challenge is to use the CCSS as a foundation to build a connection between secondary and post-secondary teachers. The focus of our work is to support these cross-sector institutions in building a professional learning community around college-ready and college-level reading. While the CCSS provide a better roadmap for Washington State schools than our previous standards, there is still a need for collaboration among secondary and post-secondary teachers to ensure students graduate equipped for college or post-secondary training.

What intervention did you test and how did each person try it?

Each cohort member ran the initial survey (included in the toolkit) with teachers and faculty from their schools. The results from the high school teachers and the college instructors showed a wide range of definitions; few agreed on the difference between the two terms. The results verified our initial hypothesis that further work is needed to define those key concepts. Spokane Public schools used the survey to get an idea of the general group thinking about college-reading and college-level reading. The survey provided a safe place to begin the dialogue.

Our next step involved using a discussion protocol to provide a structure for the initial meetings of a new professional learning community. The strength in protocols for a group of people from different schools or levels is the requirement that all people have the opportunity to share their thinking. The protocols sparked a conversation about the survey results and other teacher-generated ideas regarding what it means for students to be college-ready in reading by the end of high school and college-level in reading after the first few years in college. In our toolkit, we have provided three discussion protocols to help departments facilitate the conversation and work toward a consensus definition. The protocols choices are:

- Survey Results for Shared Understanding
- Networking Protocol
- The Multiple Perspectives Protocol

As each cohort member used one of the protocols for leading professional development around the college-reading and college-level components, we realized an application for teacher instruction and student learning was needed. This drove our team back to the state standards for high school and the WPA outcome statements for first year college composition courses to

determine how to connect the college-ready and college-level definition teachers and instructors created to what actually happens in the classroom.

To accomplish this task, we adapted an Unpacking the Standards (*Integrating the Common Core in Language Arts*) activity to use with high school and college instructors. My (Lori Inman) role as a secondary curriculum specialist afforded me the opportunity to guide my leadership team through the process of unpacking the reading standards to determine what the standard states, what it means for student learning, and what it calls for us to teach. This activity was our next action step after we used the discussion protocol to determine a working definition of college-ready reading.

Teachers in my (Lori) district have worked diligently to align the curriculum with the state standards, but as we embarked upon this process, we soon realized that simply attaching standards to what was already being taught did not ensure that we were actually teaching the reading skills required by the standards. This realization was a defining moment with potential implications for our teaching practices. It became abundantly clear that we needed to go back and take a deep dive into the reading standards if we had any hope of helping our students become college-ready in reading.

The unpacking strategy was used at my lead facilitator meeting and resulted in moments of confusion, consternation, then sudden clarity as teachers began to view the reading standards through a teaching and learning lens rather than a standards and assessment lens. We realized that we could break a standard apart and discover specific reading and vocabulary skills that we should teach and students should learn in order to become more critical readers. The standards went from something teachers post on the wall to a usable tool in the development of lesson plans and formative assessments.

Justin Young led his English colleagues through a similar unpacking activity using the same template our cohort developed. Instead of the common core standards, his team used the WPA outcomes. We quickly realized how much these two sets of standards have in common. This was an exciting moment for us because it is now clear that the connection between high school expectations for reading skills and college expectations that students read rhetorically is there, so teachers and instructors need to collaborate in a more purposeful manner to ensure all students can successfully traverse the ladder of text complexity as they learn multifaceted strategies to become proficient readers.

Our toolkit item is a two-part process. We have provided resources for high school teachers and college instructors to start the conversations about what it means to be college-ready and college-level in reading. If educators can reach a shared vision about these two terms, the teaching and learning path becomes more clear. If the goal of high school teachers is for students to become college-ready by the end of their senior year, then the next step in the process should be to unpack what the standards say so teachers can generate tasks and activities that move students toward critical reading skills. If the goal of college instructors is to move students toward college-level reading, then their next step should be a recognition that they, too must be willing to provide students with the reading strategies needed for proficiency in rhetorical reading. Our toolkit item has the resources to guide teachers and instructors through this process.

How did you determine the effectiveness of your intervention?

The initial results from the survey indicated that high school teachers and college instructors are unclear on the difference between college-ready reading and college-level reading. We can infer from the comments that part of the reason might be the lack of

collaboration between high schools and colleges, but another contributor could be the “silo” attitude that our educational institute often, unintentionally, encourages. These mixed results confirmed the need to move forward with these collaborative conversations in order to find clarity for teachers and students. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the survey and the discussion protocol should be measured by the classroom impact, and this is the area we realized should be included in our intervention. Once teachers arrive at a shared definition of college-ready and college-level reading, then what?

That is the question we attempt to answer through our unpacking the standards strategy. The effectiveness of this activity should be measured through the learning targets, the activities, and the formative assessments that teachers create based on deeply examining each reading standard. If students begin to show improvement in critical reading skills, and teachers can determine their students’ success toward mastering the reading skills demanded by the state standards, then those students should be college-ready as evidenced by their success on the Smarter Balanced Assessment given in the junior year of high school. Those students who need more time to become college-ready will have their senior year to continue honing their reading skills until they demonstrate proficiency through formative and/or summative assessments based on the standards.

Lessons Learned

One important lesson learned by our cohort was the complexity and lack of a shared understanding regarding reading instruction. Most of the college faculty assumes that students already possess the skills necessary for success when they arrive on campus, and few teachers appear ready to explicitly teach rhetorical reading strategies within their own discipline. Contextualized, discipline-specific instruction by expert readers in academic subject areas are necessary to model college-level reading for students; the more direct that instruction, the easier it is for students to achieve reading proficiency.

We also realized that the issue of “teaching reading” is not just a college one. High school ELA teachers also assume that students enter their classrooms with many of the critical reading skills needed for success. We do understand that students read at different levels; however, the attitude of many teachers reflects a lack of understanding or a lack of training on how to best assist struggling readers in the classroom. With the implementation of the CCSS, that attitude is changing as high school teachers realize the need to scaffold tasks and activities so our most vulnerable readers can find success and gain the reading skills needed to become college-ready.

Our cohort created this toolkit item because we want to begin the conversation and challenge the boundaries of conventional thinking when it comes to reading instruction at the high school and college level. It is our hope that high school teachers and college instructors will begin to understand that without a clear understanding of the reading skills students must master for success in an ever-changing job environment, we will continue with business as usual and end up leaving many students on the outside looking in as they lack the promised literacy skills our public education system should provide.