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Re-mediating Remediation

KEVIN HAD A STORY SIMILAR TO A LOT OF YOUNG MEN FROM MY OLD neighborhood. He was a good student in poor schools, schools with old textbooks, scarce resources for enrichment, high teacher turnover. And like more than a few young men from such neighborhoods, he was seduced by street life, got into trouble, and spent most of his 16th year in a juvenile camp.

Upon release, he went back to school, worked hard, graduated, did miserably on the SAT, and went to college through a special admissions program.

I had helped develop the writing component for that program, and I taught in it. Kevin's first piece of college writing—the placement exam—was peppered with grammatical errors, and the writing was disorganized and vague. This is the kind of writing we see in media accounts of remedial students, and it is the kind of writing that academics and politicians alike cite as an example of how higher education is being compromised. And such writing is troubling. If Kevin's writing remained like this, he would probably not make it through college

The traditional remedial writing course would begin with simple writing assignments and include a fair amount of workbook exercises, mostly focused on grammar and usage. The readings used for such a course would also be fairly basic, both in style and content. Though they might not be articulated, there are powerful—and limiting—assumptions about language, learning, and cognition that drive such a curriculum: students like Kevin need to go back to linguistic square one, building skill slowly through the elements of grammar; simpler reading and writing assignments won't overly tax Kevin's limited ability and will allow a concentration on correcting linguistic error; complex, demanding work and big ideas—college work—should be put on hold until Kevin displays mastery of the basics.

No wonder remediation gets such a bad rap. And no wonder legislators and college faculty grumble about it.

The program we developed for students like Kevin held to a different set of assumptions, assumptions we had developed from reading current research on language and cognition and from our own experience in the classroom. We certainly acknowledged the trouble Kevin was in and wanted to help him improve his writing on all levels, grammar to organization to style. But we didn't believe we needed to carve up language into small workbook bits

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and slowly, slowly build his skill. And in Kevin's case, we were right. By the end of the twenty week program, Kevin was writing competent papers explicating poems by Gary Soto and Jim Daniels, comparing the approaches to reading presented in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, and analyzing the decision-making in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

My co-workers and I began by surveying a range of lower-division courses to get a sense of the typical kinds of reading and writing assignments faced by students like Kevin in that critical first year. We then found readings from a variety of disciplines that were similar to those in our survey and created writing assignments that helped students develop the skills to write about them. Then we sequenced the assignments from less to more difficult and also so that they were cumulative: what a student learned to do in the first week fed into an assignment on the fifth. So, for example, early assignments Kevin faced required him to read a passage on the history of Eugenics and write a definition of it, and to read a passage with diagrams about income distribution in the U.S. and summarize it. This practice in defining and summarizing would later come into play when Kevin had to compare systematically the descriptions of becoming literate in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*.

To assist students with assignments like these, we organized instruction so that there was lots of discussion of the readings and a good deal of in-class writing where students could try out ideas and get feedback on their work as it developed.

And because many of our students, like Kevin, did display in their writing all the grammatical, stylistic, and organizational problems that give rise to remedial writing courses in the first place, we did spend a good deal of time on error—in class, in conference, on comments on their papers—*but in the context of their academic writing*. This is a huge point and one that is tied to our core assumptions about cognition and language: that writing filled with grammatical error does not preclude engagement with sophisticated intellectual material, and that error can be addressed effectively as one is engaging such material.

Certainly not all students did as well as Kevin, but many did. Those who want to purge college of remedial courses would say that Kevin doesn't belong. He proved them wrong. And those holding to a traditional remedial model would be fearful that the tasks we assigned would be too difficult, would discourage Kevin. He proved them wrong as well.

Since we mounted those programs, some studies have emerged that confirm the approach we took. Successful remedial programs set high standards, are focused on inquiry and problem solving in a substantial curriculum, utilize a pedagogy that is supportive and interactive, draw on a variety of techniques and approaches, and are in-line with student goals and provide credit for coursework.

I certainly believe in this approach, have seen it work, have written about it. And I've experienced it. I came out of elementary school with a dreary knowledge of mathematics. Whether the cause was a poor curriculum or uninspired teaching or my own fear of numbers . . . who knows? I didn't pass algebra in high school, had to take it over in the summer, barely passed it then, was mystified by it. And things got worse after that. My SAT quantitative score was awful; my GRE score was even lower, the score of someone barely conscious. Needless to say, I avoided anything even vaguely mathematical through as much of my post-high school education as possible. Then came graduate school in educational psychology and a two-quarter requirement in statistics.

Educational researchers Michael Cole, Peg Griffin, Kris Gutierrez, and others have a nice way of talking about successful remediation. They refer to re-mediation—that is changing the environment and the means through which students are taught the material they had not mastered before. This definition certainly characterizes what I tried to do with the remediation programs I've developed, and it nicely describes what happened to me with the dreaded statistics.

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I realize that my story does not perfectly match the typical remedial tale: I was not taking again a course I had taken earlier in my educational career. But the situation is similar: I had failed, barely passed, or avoided mathematics in the past and was now facing a higher-level course with dismal basic knowledge of mathematics. There's a further point to make here. Remediation occurs in many ways, on many levels, involving most of us at some time or another.

In the summer before I entered graduate school, I signed up for an introductory-level statistics course at UCLA Extension, and I hired a tutor. The course had a clear and meaningful goal for me. And having a tutor provided a huge amount of assistance, some of it in basic math, though in the context of statistics. And—no small thing—she offered a relationship built around mathematics, a human face to a subject that had scared me my whole scholastic life.

I was fortunate in that my graduate courses were taught by an excellent instructor who distributed to us draft chapters of a textbook he was writing, a clear and coherent text. In the text and in lecture, the professor continually provided concrete, real-world examples drawn from education. A few of us in the class formed a study group, providing another

social context for learning. And during the first term, I kept in touch with my tutor, providing continuity and further, yes, remediation.

I ended up doing just fine in both statistics courses—to my great pleasure and surprise, I can honestly tell you. So I know the feeling of successful remediation, of re-mediating mathematics in a manner that countered a dozen years of failure and aversion. Of course, I had changed along the way and had powerful motivation to get the stuff this time around. Of course. But the scholastic graveyard is littered with folks who wanted desperately to master a topic and didn't. It takes more than desire. A complaint often leveled at remediation by legislators is that they are "paying twice" for instruction in material that should have been learned earlier. Fair enough, but when remediation, re-mediation, is done well, the material in a sense is encountered anew, in a new context, with new curriculum and new pedagogy. For some of us this makes all the difference in the world.

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There is a fairly standard media story about remedial students. I have several laid out before me. The story is one of young people with a high-school diploma or GED mired in remedial math or English courses that they repeatedly fail. There are students like these for sure. But there are many others with a wide range of profiles in a wide range of institutions. Some are placed in remedial courses and some self-select into them. There are returning students who at one point had mastered the material in question, but need to revisit it. There are immigrant students who are building skill in English. There are students who are seeking new careers or who have served in the military and do need a few basic courses in English and math, but who find their way. And there are students like Kevin who are fresh out of high school with a less-than-privileged education who can catch up with the right intervention.

Do the courses work? Until recently there hasn't been very good evaluation of the effectiveness of remedial courses and programs, but more rigorous research is emerging. The findings are mixed, but do show that for many students who are not severely underprepared (particularly in reading, the core academic skill), remedial courses can make a difference in persistence and success in college. And as for the numbers of courses needed, many students require one or two courses to get up to speed—the remedial domain is not glutted with students hopelessly cycling through multiple courses.

I don't for a moment want to deny the gravity of underpreparation. And I'm not being dismissive about the cost; I spent too many years running programs to be blithe about resources. I also share the dissatisfaction with the kind of curriculum and pedagogy that too often characterizes remedial education. But there is, I think, a broader, important issue here, and that is the place of remediation in a nation that prides itself as being a "second-chance"

society. This holds true on both a macro systems level, and on the level of the individual.

There have to be mechanisms in an educational system as vast and complex and flawed as ours to remedy the system's failures. Rather than marginalizing remediation, colleges should invest more intellectual resources into it, making it as serious and effective as it can be. The American college and university no longer defines itself in the classical sense of a place apart from society, an intellectual cloister; the defining word now is "entrepreneurial," and the institution is tied inextricably with government and industry. But there remains, I think, a tendency for colleges and universities to see themselves as detached from the social problems in their environment, and this tendency emerges in discussions of remediation. This orientation is certainly less salient in the community college—which defines itself as "the people's college"—though it is evident in the attitude of some community college faculty in the traditional liberal arts and sciences.

But in an open, vibrant society, the college can't set itself apart, for it is integral to a rich system of human development, reaching down through the schools and well beyond the point of graduation. Colleges and universities honor this connection in a partial way through teacher education, professional programs (e.g., for MBA's), and extension. But the connection is selective, not a fundamental way of conceiving an institution's mission. It is a terrible thing that so many students—especially those from less-privileged backgrounds—come to college unprepared. But colleges can't fold their arms in a huff and try to pull away from the problem. They are embedded in the social and educational surround.

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This notion of a second-chance, of building safety nets into a flawed system, fits with a democratic and humane definition of the person, one that offers a robust idea of development: the person as changing, coming at something again, fluid, living in a system that acknowledges that people change, retool, grow, need to return to old mistakes, or just to that which is past and forgotten. Remediation may be an unfortunate term for all this, for it carries with it the sense of disease, of a medical intervention. "Something that corrects an evil, a fault, or an error," notes the American Heritage Dictionary. But when done well, remediation becomes a key mechanism in a democratic model of human educational development.

Works Cited

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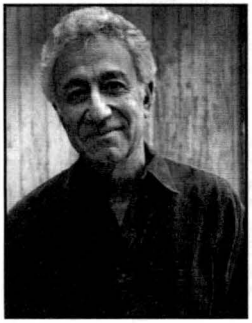

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