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Changing the Model:
Working with Underprepared Students

The time came when I found myself getting more and more less motivated. — Louise, a Project Bridge student.

When Louise talks about her problems learning basic skills, she is, without knowing it, also saying something important about the programs offered students like her. Researchers have proposed theories; politicians have funded new programs; teachers at all levels have tried to help. Yet in America today, the number of functionally illiterate adults is still growing—23 million according to the Department of Education (1983) or as many as 60 million according to Jonathan Kozol (1984). Like their students, teachers across the land find themselves “getting more and more less motivated.”

Many of these adults have sat through, or dropped out of, conventional remedial classes in junior and senior high schools. They have learned little. How can we work with students who cannot read, write, or multiply at an appropriate level so that they succeed in academic and vocational programs?

Project Bridge is a community college program for remedial students who are so unprepared for academic work that they are often considered beyond hope educationally. The program is working. A significant number of Bridge students successfully complete regular college courses leading to certificates and degrees. Others improve their skills sufficiently to get jobs that don’t dead-end.

The Bridge model need not be confined to community colleges. It can be adapted for underprepared students in junior high schools, middle schools, and high schools. What is needed is a core group of committed teachers, a supportive administrator who knows how to work the bureaucracy, and a willingness to change teaching strategies.

The model we describe in detail below creates a school within a school. Logistical changes make possible pedagogical changes; a curriculum rich in content and ideas is substituted for content-less, idea-less skills classes. Students and teachers together build a sense of community that overcomes the isolation of both student and teacher.

Existing Remedial Programs

What do programs offer the growing number of remedial students in middle schools, high schools, and community colleges? As a rule, remedial means repetitive, the same paper-and-pencil drills, with few classroom activities, little interaction, little discussion. In these remedial
classes, learners are often kept distant from ideas, from mathematical experiences that require more than memorization, from exploring the meaning of what they read, from writing. Too many of their class hours are filled with drills on spelling, punctuation, word attack, and multiplication tables. Thus, we see a vicious cycle of non-achievement: year after year, basic skills students are kept away from ideas until they become “more skilled.” But they do not become more skilled because they are kept from ideas.

Profile of the Students

In 1977, Mina Shaughnessy broke new ground when she took seriously the group of students whom she describes as “true outsiders...strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were...to assign them.” These new students who enrolled in increasing numbers as open admission policies were instituted had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up. Shaughnessy describes them as having grown up in “...ethnic or racial enclaves,” speaking languages or dialects at home different from the academic language of the school. Most of them had never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which “had worked its way deep into their feelings about school and about themselves as students” (pp. 2-3).

We can presume that many of these students are the adult counterparts of the children whom some researchers in the 1960s had— and it now seems clear, wrong-headedly— characterized as “linguistically and culturally deficient” (Deutsch, 1967), and whom others a few years later termed “culturally different” (Labov, 1972; Kochman, 1972; Heath, 1983). They sometimes take for granted— now as they did as youngsters— that the way school is “spozed to be” (Herndon, 1960) is irrelevant, distant, and a place for failure. But many nevertheless still hope to bend education to serve their needs and so improve their lives.

Carol is one of these students. A single mother of four, she is determined to become a vocational nurse. She moved to Oakland from Arizona, since education in California was tuition-free and seemed more accessible. When she entered college, she took the entry test for the Licensed Vocational Nursing program. The required score was sixty-six percent. She scored eight percent. She has been going to classes to improve this score and at the same time raising her children in a new and unfamiliar city.

Everett is another: a man of twenty-six whose combined street, army, and prison experiences had left him with a future full of questions and almost no notion about how to resolve them; in spite of repeated disappointments in school, he hopes to make something of himself if he gets an education. Jeremiah had to drop Upward Bound in Kentucky when his wife became pregnant; now he returns to school in California ten years later to become the welder he started out to be. Linda and Betty, cutting class and eating countless packages of potato chips, are no clearer about what they want to do at twenty-five than they were at sixteen, and it is evident that as yet they do not have the basic skills or the attitude about work necessary to move out of remedial programs. Eve enrolled in community college twelve years ago but child care problems forced her to drop out; now after years of minimum wage jobs, she wants the skills to get better permanent work.
The basic skills—reading, writing, and mathematics—present major problems to these students. They have limited academic vocabularies, inadequate word-attack strategies, difficulty identifying a main idea in a passage, and problems inferring information from a given text. Many have done little reading since high school; some have never read a whole book. They are also inexperienced and non-fluent writers. Most have difficulty filling a single page, organizing their thoughts on paper, providing detail, and even more trouble with paragraphing, spelling and punctuation. Faced with a writing task, they often feel a high level of anxiety and say they have nothing to write about. Finally, their math, on the whole, is limited to work with whole numbers; often they don’t understand the written instructions in the math book.

Carol, Everett and Jeremiah, Linda and Betty, Eve and all the others cannot read, write or compute well enough to move beyond entry-level jobs, complete college programs, or participate fully as informed citizens in mainstream society. Yet they keep families together on limited budgets, often work odd hours in order to attend school, juggle home and school responsibilities—all because they view the community college as a route to a better life.

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Program Description

Goals. Traditional remedial approaches to education have viewed the seriously underprepared adult learner as deficient in a series of basic skills. For example, the student is viewed as needing to learn how to write a topic sentence or punctuate and capitalize properly in order to write, or to learn the rules for operations with fractions in order to compute satisfactorily. In Project Bridge, we have come to understand that the essential goal of a remedial program is indeed to help the student catch up, but topic sentences or capitalization do not receive our primary attention. Instead, we have defined our task to be one of teaching students:

To understand and use school language and to perform school tasks. After mention of essays in class, an incoming student wrote in her journal, “What is an S. A.?” Such a student needs more than practice in spelling or paragraph development; she needs to understand and practice using the concepts that school language is designed to convey.

To approach new information analytically, to make explicit connections between ideas, and between those ideas and one’s experience. Students must come to recognize that percentages, for example, express the same information as decimals; or that the short story is more than a series of recounted events but has theme, setting, characters, and may even demonstrate concepts taught in sociology (e.g., role models).
To participate in an academic community. Relationships between students need to shift so as to include school-centered as well as social relations, including questions such as “How did you do that homework problem?” or “What do you think about that play we saw?”

We do not claim to teach students to talk or to think. We do claim to show students who certainly know how to think and speak to utilize these abilities in the academic setting.

Project Bridge makes it possible for students to acquire “basic” skills through the following strategies and organizational principles, presented here as a framework for practice. This framework helps teachers to usher students across the great divide from school failure to academic competence; it seems to reduce the number of missteps and increase the likelihood of a successful transition.

**Strategies.** Four strategies are basic to this program.

1. **Student-centered classroom.** The first strategy places student need in the center of the curriculum. In most college courses, the goal of instruction is to impart a fixed body of knowledge or to have the student acquire a level of skill in a specific period of time (Intermediate Algebra, English 1A). Most Bridge students find the fixed tempo of such learning difficult. Yet the alternative of self-paced program learning assumes a student motivated by subject matter itself or by clear personal goals, assumptions teachers in basic skills courses can rarely make. Students usually drop out of such classes. Project Bridge staff has developed a student-centered classroom where there is a defined curriculum; however, the instructor finds ways for each student to make educational progress.

   For example, we have a writing unit on the interview. Class discussion first centers on the purpose of an interview and on how to formulate appropriate questions (i.e., questions that are relevant to the interviewee’s expertise, and that require more than a “yes” or “no” response); students role-play mock interviews with a tutor, and then each other. At this point each student is expected to go outside the program and to interview someone who can provide information about something the student is personally interested in. Students have interviewed the head of the nursing program, a favorite teacher, an elderly relative who had never shared her life story, a Marine recruiter. Some students complete the assignment on their own; others need help setting up an appointment. Some may even need help to formulate questions and some need help in organizing and writing up the information.

   Students acquire different skills as they proceed through this interview unit. The most skilled will have learned how to use resources within the community, to gather information from other people’s experiences and to present this coherently in written form. The least skilled will have worked on formulating questions and on relating information from the world to the classroom. Each has made progress toward becoming a successful student.

2. **The Primacy of Spoken Language.** Teachers in Project Bridge cannot assume that students use written language either to gather information or to communicate what they have learned. Although these students are uncomfortable users of written language, their classroom talk is
expressive and colorful, and reflects a wealth of life experience. They are often painfully aware of the gap between the language of everyday life and the language of academia.

Project Bridge staff stresses the use of oral language in the classroom. Important ideas are presented through talk first, and only then through reading (often oral) in class. Moreover, the staff is convinced that if information is to become understanding, the students must filter it through their own experience and express it in their own words, via discussions and journal writing. Thus listening and talking provide the base from which written language emerges.

In most classes, we use interactive dialogue journals as a link between face-to-face conversation and academic writing. An example from one student’s reading journal in response to Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* says: “To be trueful it sounded like talking to some people I know and some of the words sound like me. And that Mr.— was too much for his self. And also I was glad that his wife wanted to learn to read and that her sister was determined to teach her how.” A’s students learn to write fluently in response to ideas and text, teachers can show students written conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing.

3. Incorporating Minority Group Culture. Recent research into the problems of minority underachievers shows the importance of a curriculum that incorporates the culture or language of the minority groups it is teaching (Cummins, 1986). While all students benefit from exploring minority literature and history, minority students often feel particularly engaged when introduced to historical or literary treatment which sheds light on an emotion, experience, or question. In a sociology class, for example, a unit on Migrations first asks students to interview acquaintances or family members on why they or their forebears came to California. On the basis of this information, students develop hypotheses about common motives underlying individual decisions to migrate. A series of guided questions then leads the class to examine the historical forces propelling the large scale Black migration of the 1940s or the continuing migration of Hispanic people to California.

4. Information About the World. Students who come to Project Bridge frequently have scant knowledge of the world beyond their personal experiences or what they have seen on television. They often are unfamiliar with maps, have only hearsay knowledge of chromosomes and atoms, cannot explain how the branches of government function. They rarely understand how their private troubles relate to public issues.

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Recognizing these needs, the Bridge staff has so far developed content classes in biology, chemistry, sociology, humanities, ethnic studies, and computer science. Inherent in these classes is the notion that reading and writing are communication skills best learned in the process of communicating genuine information and ideas— that is, content. Ideas are interesting to all...
people, all people have ideas, and it is these ideas which motivate them to read, write and compute in the first place.

Content courses have been developed so that they a) present significant ideas in the respective discipline, b) make those ideas accessible to students who read poorly, c) develop academic language skills, d) base the acquisition of knowledge on the students’ non-academic experience, e) encourage the student to think analytically, and f) result in a student product (e.g., books of student writings, of biology experiments, of arithmetic word problems; a collage; a videotape of final reports).

Science courses incorporate hands-on activities (microscopes the first day in biology class), provide guided reading questions for many of the handouts, and teach significant scientific principles through experiments that use familiar materials and experiences (why does a cake rise?). Students are often asked to develop hypotheses about the phenomena they observe in the laboratory, and to devise experiments which will verify or challenge these. In the unit on animal behavior, for example, students work in groups of three or four. They first observe animals such as flatworms (under a dissecting microscope), garden snails, or pill bugs. They then develop questions (what makes the animal move the way it does? what makes it respond the way it does?), formulate hypotheses (it moves toward moisture, it moves away from light), and setup experiments to test these hypotheses. In looking at the results, each group makes a graph to show the data, draws its conclusions, and then presents the findings to the rest of the class. For more advanced students, these reports are written up as a scientific paper, put together in book form, and become the end product, one for each member of the class.

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The same principles are followed in the humanities and social science courses. In a survey course of 20th century Afro-American literature, for example, students read poetry and prose not only as literature but also as a barometer of issues or of the mood of a historical period. The semester may begin with work on a choral reading of “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and “I Have Known Rivers” by Langston Hughes. The choral rendering facilitates discussion of each poet’s mood and point of view. In contrasting the images and the messages of the two poems, students learn the differences between the early 1900s, considered a nadir of Afro-American history, and the post-World War I era, which gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance, the tremendous artistic flowering centered in Harlem.

Mathematics classes develop analytical thinking and problem solving skills, and also provide practice with basic arithmetic operations. Several curriculum units make ideas from elementary algebra and plane geometry accessible to students learning arithmetic. One such unit, for example, teaches students to plot points on a Cartesian co-ordinate plane, and to graph “rules” such as “the second number is 2 more than 3 times the first number.” Ultimately students
discover that such rules produce straight line graphs, and that two rules will have a “simultaneous solution” at the intersection of the two lines.

Bridge students, like all students, need access to computers. Some students begin with high levels of computer anxiety; others are naturals. This initial access to the computer can open a new world. Stuart, for example, came in reading at a fourth-grade level. When he enrolled in the Project Bridge Computer Science class, he discovered an aptitude for working with the computer and became unofficial tutor for everyone else in his class. The next semester he was hired as a tutor in the college computer lab. His improved reading and writing seem to us not unrelated to his success in this class.

These strategies reflect necessary pedagogical changes. They would not be possible, however, without certain logistical changes as well.

**Program and Classroom Organization**

Regular college remedial classes meet only three or four hours per week. Project Bridge meets twelve. We have found that a high intensity program which meets several hours daily lets students who often find it difficult to study at home become more deeply involved in schoolwork.

Regular college remedial classes are composed of different students in each class. The same students are together in all Bridge classes. Because teachers teach the same students, they can coordinate curriculum and relate activities. Students may read essays on school or work experiences in the reading class while writing them in writing class, and may discuss these essays in sociology class. They may learn the metric system in math class in order to use metric measurements in chemistry. The math instructor may read the part of Oedipus in the humanities play reading. The purpose here is twofold. We are anxious for students to understand that knowledge can be approached from many points of view and that looking at the same or similar material in different ways deepens understanding. Students also develop close ties with each other and with the staff because we spend a good deal of time together and have shared experiences and interests that transcend a particular class and become program-wide.

The effort to build community underlies much of the classroom structure. The mere fact that the same twenty-five students stay together during the program lays the groundwork for this community; activities which are simultaneously social and school related (such as a theater event or a guest speaker) and class activities (such as reading each other’s work) further build these relationships. As one teacher reported, “I feel strongly there is a learning community in my classes, although I’m not sure what to use as evidence that this is the case. The atmosphere is not competitive. They work well together in collective projects, and outside of class they look out for one another— waiting for each other after class, phoning, delivering messages, papers, and projects.”

A sense of community, we find, encourages support groups. For example, a group formed to study math to prepare for the entrance exam to the Licensed Vocational Nursing Program at the
college. Students met outside of class time to work together, and in the weeks before the test worked as a small group during class time. Most found that working together helped them to acquire skills and encouraged them to keep studying even when they felt frustrated about their ability to master the material. When these relationships did not develop, the absence of community was sorely felt. Teachers also noted that when social friendships remained purely social, the students pulled each other out of class; when friendships became school-based as well, attendance remained good and students made good use of the program.

Tutorial support has been helpful for Bridge students. Such support allows the instructor to vary the format: small groups led by a tutor, students working in pairs or threesomes with tutors moving from group to group, individualized lessons, and whole group discussions. Often the student will participate in more than one such format in a given class session. The object here is to have students become comfortable with both familiar and unfamiliar learning situations and discourse styles.

**We can expect that, in general, students enrolled in a Bridge-like program remain in school at twice the rate of other remedial students and earn better grades when they enter academic classes.**

As the program has developed, we have become increasingly aware of the need for a special counselor. Our students are faced with a wide array of real-life problems: eviction notices, erratic childcare, insufficient money, health crises, abusive relationships. While the problems for adolescent students might be different in kind, they are often as serious. Such problems seriously interfere with any student’s ability to focus on school tasks. A new kind of counselor needs to be assigned to the program, one whose task includes crisis counseling, and who can provide information and referral to supportive services in the community.

Finally, when students leave the support of a student-centered classroom and begin to take courses in a regular academic or vocational program, they often give up. The transition from a supportive academic community to content centered college classes may be too abrupt. We have experimented with a transitional course which provides instructional support coupled with individual and small group tutoring for students who are ready to enroll in regular classes. This course presented learning techniques such as mapping, concept journals, and test taking strategies. One of its main functions was to provide students with a chance to report successes and failures in other courses, and be assured that cheers (or groans) would be forthcoming. After one or two semesters, students recognized that they were confident and comfortable in the courses they were taking and no longer needed even this minimal support. At this point these students had become independent learners. It is ideal if such a course can be incorporated.
**Evaluation**

During the first semester significantly more Bridge students completed remedial units and stayed in school than contrast group students. Further, during semester two, students from Project Bridge who made the best academic use of the program completed more units with a higher grade point average than the comparable group of contrast students. We can expect that, in general, students enrolled in a Bridge-like program remain in school at twice the rate of other remedial students and earn better grades when they enter academic classes.

**Wider Implications**

Today, when we hear cries for student accountability, we need to insist as well that remedial programs give each student a chance that is genuine, not simply nominal. Social policies must continue to provide access to genuine education for all segments of our population and particularly for those whom education has not served well. This will be possible only if our institutions are able to offer programs that lead underprepared students to the literacy that enables them to function in academic and technical settings.

The model we have described does just that. It can be effective with students who are disengaged, those who are far behind by junior high school. Content courses, a core curriculum of basic skills that incorporate the students’ diverse cultures, integrated teaching techniques, student-centered classrooms, a learning community: these principles provide a bridge for Shaughnessy’s “true outsiders.” Strangers to academia can get beyond the remedial waiting room, can get information, vocabulary, concepts and skills. They can function successfully in academic settings.

**References**


