

Promising Practice

Development of a Contextualized ESL Bridge Curriculum



June 2010

PRACTICE CONTEXT

Black Hawk College (BHC) is a comprehensive community college serving all or part of nine counties and a population of approximately 224,510 residents in a mostly rural area of north-west Illinois. This practice was fully developed and implemented for the Shifting Gears (SG) initiative during the 2007–08 academic years. Heeding BHC’s strategic plans to expand the student base to include their relatively large population of adult education students, the timing of development of the bridge for adult learners was fortuitous. Coinciding with SG, college administrators were looking for a program offering that would provide adults with a credential to secure employment or improve their career opportunities in a relatively short amount of time. Based on several carefully considered factors, the college chose the Transportation, Distribution and Logistics (TDL) industry sector to develop the bridge, as the college’s geographic location is a hub of transportation on the Mississippi River and on a major east-west interstate (I-80). Also, the college had existing courses and programs in the logistics area.

PRACTICE DESCRIPTION

To help address the educational and employment needs of a relatively large English language learner population (800-900 students annually) the College developed an occupationally contextualized bridge course for English as Second Language (ESL) adult education students interested in careers in TDL. The 16-week, ESL bridge course was developed to address two goals: 1) contextualize a standard adult education ESL course to prepare students to transition into the WDS certificate program, and 2) provide comprehensive support services including tutoring, learning communities, targeted use of instructional software, and career counseling to enhance students’ success.

The ESL curriculum was co-developed by an experienced, full-time ESL teacher and another contractor (external to BHC) who was familiar with Georgia’s “Quickstart” curriculum. Quickstart was used as a model to create a customized outline of concepts and terminology to contextualize with the ESL curricula.

The instructor contextualized the ESL curriculum with reading, writing, and math content she aligned with the WDS program and with competencies needed in the larger TDL industry. To do this, she read WDS program texts to determine the academic level

required and the common vocabulary needed by her ESL bridge students. In addition to the requisite foundation in English grammar, she infused over 500 vocabulary words, including terms that reference math, the industry, and the workplace including conversational words and jargon that Americans regularly use. Classroom strategies and instruction were diverse and included warehouse tours and outside speakers, mentors and tutors who were involved in the TDL industry. Students strengthened their computer literacy by learning some content via computer-based modules; they watched American films to learn about American culture and to hear nuances in English pronunciation and contemporary American jargon. The curriculum also included employability and teamwork skills, career development and job acquisition skills, college success skills, and lessons on health and wellness. To be sure all students were prepared to enter the fall semester WDS courses, BHC also created a 6-week ESL refresher course to help students retain their new knowledge during the summer break between the end of the spring bridge course and the start of the fall semester.

SUPPORTING STRATEGIES

1. *Hiring a Part-Time Math Instructor*

Black Hawk College hired a part-time math instructor to teach bridge students in the classroom and on an individual basis to ensure they understood math vocabulary well enough to succeed in their subsequent WDS courses. The ESL instructor also included math-related vocabulary because, as she explained, “many ESL students have knowledge of math principles but cannot read the mathematical words on the exams and thus, score lower than their actual competency level.”

2. *Curricular Alignment and Career Pathway Development*

From the beginning of the SG initiative, BHC adult education administrators designed their approach to bridge course development to be consistent with the larger career pathway framework because they understood its utility for transitioning students as their needs and aspirations evolved. Bridge course content was carefully aligned with entry level competencies for the WDS program, a certificate program comprised of five courses that earn vocational skills credit. The WDS certificate is aligned to the Inventory Specialist Certificate program, which is aligned to the college’s Associate of Science degree in Supply Chain Management, which is articulated with a baccalaureate program in Supply Chain Management at Western Illinois University.

3. *Intensive Transition Support Services*

Black Hawk College hired an Advisor to support the diverse needs of the bridge students through coaching, registration assistance, academic and financial aid advisement, coordination of local resources for child care, assistance to help students secure transportation resources, and creation of events to help the students feel a part of a learning community. In addition, the Advisor wrote brief profiles about each student to provide to the WDS program instructors to familiarize them with the population as a whole and the individuals' specific needs or issues.

4. *Utilizing Data for Program Improvement*

Due to student demand, the College offered two sections of the WDS certificate program in two formats; one met five days per week over thirteen weeks, and the other met two days per week over twenty-five weeks. The additional section was offered to accommodate bridge students' work schedules, to accelerate the WDS curriculum into two different models, and to measure student outcomes to help determine the most optimal delivery model. The college tracked multiple measures of student and program outcomes for each section and of sub-populations of students to determine optimal program components and potential contributors to improved student outcomes. Overall, the BHC bridge team embraced a continuous improvement culture that called for ongoing re-evaluation of student outcomes in response to the program's evolving nature.

College's on-line registration process. However, the bridge course Advisor intervened and helped students register for the bridge.

- *Reduced services for evening students and staff*

Once enrolled in the WDS program, students and faculty in the evening section did not have access to the same amount and level of services available to students and faculty in the day-time section. Again, the course Advisor assisted, picking up books during the day and delivering them to the evening students, assisting students with completing financial aid applications during evening hours, etc.

- *Challenges to curriculum alignment*

Several issues arose related to curriculum alignment between adult education ESL courses, the WDS certificate program, and college credit courses and programs. The bridge course content and competency level were aligned with the WDS program, a vocational skills credit program. It was not aligned with the developmental education English and math courses at the college or with academic-level ESL courses. The College is addressing these gaps as they are preparing a healthcare bridge course so students "have a clear understanding where the bridge does and does not lead."

RESOURCES

Leadership of this practice was situated in the Adult Education division of the college. Bridge course development was spearheaded by the Associate Dean of Extended Educational Programs, the Coordinator of Literacy Programs, and a part-time program Advisor. Also highly supportive of the bridge were the college president, vice presidents, and faculty from academic ESL, adult education and the specific career area. Externally, the bridge was supported by an active partnership with Eastern Iowa Community College in the Department of Labor (DOL), a partner in a federal grant focusing on logistics entitled, "Joined by a River." Further, BHC is a partner in the Quad-Cities Logistics Roundtable, a large employer advisory group to the DOL grant which provides BHC with coordinated business and industry support for the College's several logistics courses and programs. The program also benefitted from collaboration with the college's Carl D. Perkins Administrator who was involved in the implementation of the "Joined by a River" grant, and also provided funding to pay instructors for the additional cohort. In addition, she assisted in recruiting, interviewing, and hiring additional instructors for the bridge.

CHALLENGES

- *Low computer literacy*

The bridge students' low level of computer literacy posed a problem when they attempted to register for classes using the

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

All 19 of the ESL students enrolled in the bridge course completed all five courses in the WDS certificate program. Given the success of the SG bridge course in the manufacturing/TDL industry sector, the bridge curriculum process has also been applied to developing a bridge in the health science sector. With the initial SG bridge as inspiration, the College expects this second bridge program to be even more robust and further its mission for student success.

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