

Chapter 8

Pedagogical Interventions in the First-Year Writing Classroom for First- Generation College Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses ways of engaging first-generation college students in the first-year writing classroom. Many interventions exist for helping first-generation college students adjust to and thrive in academic life, such as TRIO programs. This chapter focuses on how instructors in writing classrooms can create pedagogical interventions to encourage and engage these students in academic discourse. To better understand how the pedagogical interventions were received, the author studied contemporary research on multiple ways of engaging first-generation college students in the first-year writing classroom. Along with this research, the author also collected data from students that identified what activities and assignments most engaged them and what they learned from those assignments. From this data and outside research, the author determined three main pedagogical interventions to help first-generation college students succeed, such as peer review groups, creating empathetic spaces, and assigning empathetic writing genres.

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INTRODUCTION

Creating instructional strategies to develop a first-generation pedagogy in the first-year writing classroom can benefit the retention and engagement of first-generation college students. First-generation college students are considered an at-risk population in our American colleges and universities because of various barriers they face. First-generation college students are in danger of dropping out by the second year, often arrive to college with underprepared study skills, and have lower test scores than their multiple generation college peers (Davis p 24, 2010). Despite these barriers, creating structured opportunities around writing assignments, peer review, and other aspects of classroom instruction can benefit these students, as well as all students in the writing classroom. I see these instructional opportunities as pedagogical interventions to encourage mentoring and increasing academic and writing knowledge for first-generation college students. This chapter shares pedagogical interventions that a writing instructor may develop in efforts to better engage first-generation college students. All of these pedagogical practices have been informed from a previous study that I conducted at a medium-sized, Midwestern university, as well as by previous research on first-generation college students and the pedagogical imperatives that may help them succeed academically and socially in an academic setting. To begin my discussion, I'll share the common markers of a first-generation college student.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

According to the Higher Education Act of 1965's chapter on Federal TRIO programs, a first-generation college student is "an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree" (Chapter 1, section 402a). Darling and Smith's scholarship on first-generation college students gives the most concise definition, and a definition I use to describe first-generation college students throughout this chapter. Darling and Smith define a first-generation college student as "a student who does not have a parent who holds a baccalaureate degree" (2007, p. 204). This definition allows for a parent who has some college preparation, but who has never completed their degree at a four-year institution of higher learning.

In part because first-generation college students have had neither parent attain a four-year college degree, these students also encounter higher risk factors for dropping out of college. Vicki Stieha in "Expectations and Experience: First-Generation College Students and Persistence" notes that even if a first-generation college student doesn't have the "high-risk factors for dropping out, such as minority status" these students still run a risk of attrition because of their lack of support and social capital (2009, p. 239). Coupled with the lack of parental and community support some of these first-generation college students face, significant learning barriers to academic success are created. Because of learning barriers of parents, community, and a lack of social capital, writing teachers must make pedagogical moves and opportunities to engage first-generation college students so that these students can be successful.

Because first-generation college students represent a unique, yet diverse population, my research focuses on implementation of the best pedagogical practices to help reach these students in the space of

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