



*Northern Essex Community College*

## **Looping Into College-Level Writing**

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by Clare Thompson-Ostrander

Basic Writing is a challenging course. Students must make a lot of adjustments to survive the demands of the class. In fifteen weeks, students learn how to develop and organize their writing, they learn the writing process, and they develop the self-confidence and discipline needed to succeed in college. All of this growth happens within a tightly knit community of peers, tutors, and teachers. Students learn that writing does not happen in a vacuum and that writers need a supportive community to thrive. In short, students who successfully complete the Basic Writing course with a C or better are people who have been transformed as writers and as students. All this progress is exciting, but it is also fragile. At the end of every semester, I am faced with mixed emotions as I let my Basic Writing students go. I feel overjoyed for the success my developmental writers have gained in our Basic Writing community; however, I also feel concern for them. Over the years, many of my developmental students have expressed their anxieties over taking the next step, entering English Composition I. In general, their biggest concern is that their success in Basic Writing will not follow them into English Composition I. Like other instructors who teach both Basic Writing and English Composition I, I know that students are most successful when the two courses are taken consecutively. As I watch my students leave on that last day of the semester, I feel a sense of loss, the sense of a job half done because my students and I have worked so hard to build a supportive learning community, and all too soon, it ends.

This sense of loss led me to ask the question: What if there were a way to extend what we all worked so hard to build in Basic Writing? I spent a lot of time researching ways to extend the supportive learning environment my students and I create in a Basic Writing class, and my search led me to rediscover an educational practice called “looping.”

### What Is Looping?

Jim Grant, Bob Johnson, and Irv Richardson, authors of the seminal book on looping, *The Looping Handbook*, invented the term to describe the practice of keeping a group of students together with the same teacher for an extended amount of time (1). The concept of looping has been called by other names such as: student-teacher progression, continuous learning, persisting groups, or multi-year grouping (Ferrance 1). Looping is certainly not a new concept in education. Dating as far back as the one-room school house, in which one teacher taught the same group of multi-age students for years, looping began as an organizational necessity, and, throughout time, gained and lost popularity. Most who write about the history of looping begin with Rudolf Steiner. He was an Austrian educator and philosopher who created a school for the children of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette factory employees. In his school, the same teacher progressed with the same students from grades 1-8. Currently, in Germany, a version of this practice is still in place; teachers remain with the same group of students from grades 1-4 (Grant 16; Ferrance 4). Looping gained more popularity in the United States when in 1974, a highly respected educator and founder of the Central Park East Schools in New York City and author of, *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier, implemented looping as an “essential” educational practice at her school. Meier’s influence grew and since the late 1980’s, elementary, middle, and high-school districts across America have embraced the practice of keeping the same group of students with the same teacher for two or more years (George 3; Ferrance 4).

At the heart of looping lies the social connection students and teachers form over an extended period of time. As a group, they rely on each other while they move through the difficult tasks associated with learning and growing as human beings. Professor Emeritus of Education in the Department of Education Leadership at Florida State University and co-author of the book, *Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping and Schools-Within-a-School*, Dr. Paul George, describes how even outside of the classroom, extended supportive communities have proven to be extremely successful. He points to the ways in which healthy families, military operations, champion sports teams, and even religious organizations all thrive when positive long-term relationships are in place. People in these groups grow to trust each other and work more efficiently together when reaching their common goal, whether that goal is raising a well-adjusted child, winning a championship, or completing a work project (1). By nature, human beings crave positive interpersonal connections with each other, especially when facing challenging situations or transitions in their lives.

How all of this applies to the college-level writing classroom is important to note. Research on looping shows that students and teachers who form long-term relationships reap many lasting academic and social benefits, and while most of the available research on looping centers on elementary and middle-school students, the advantages these students experienced through looping are strikingly similar to those my students and I gained in our looping experiment at NECC.

### **Who Are These Students and Why Is Looping a Good Fit for Them?**

In the spring of 2000, when I first began teaching Basic Writing at NECC, the Curriculum Coordinator, Joanna Fortna, asked to meet with me in her office. Her office is much like you'd expect a writing teacher's office to be, a little on the messy side with piles of papers stacked on her desk and books spilling out from bookshelves. She also had a lot of knick-knacks around the room and some plants on her desk. She is a lot like me; we collect stuff that inspires us and keep it close by as we work. On the windowsill of her office, she had a collection of colored filters photographers use to add light effects to a photograph. Her son was studying photography and had given them to her. We talked about the filters, about how all the colors sifted sunlight in their own unique ways, and then she told me that those filters reminded her of her Basic Writing students. Like each filter shedding its own version of sunlight, each Basic Writing student has his/her own story to filter through writing. I've often come back to that afternoon with Joanna and her colored filters when people ask me what it is like to teach Basic Writing.

The truth is it is difficult to clearly define the social and academic makeup of a Basic Writing course. Students who enter the course come from such varied educational, ethnic, and social backgrounds that it is almost impossible to apply the term "typical" to any of them. In one class, there may be a refugee from Africa sitting next to a stay-at-home mom who has been out of school for more than twenty years. Next to an ex-gang member will sit a student who fell through the cracks in his first semester of a four-year school; there may also be a student who is living in a halfway house for recovering addicts and next to her will sit a student with high-end Asperger's syndrome. Additionally, any one of these students could also have a moderate to severe learning disability that further complicates his or her chances of success in college. Students in Basic Writing will also vary in their motivation levels. Some students are angry that they placed in Basic Writing, others are relieved, and others figured as much and are somewhat apathetic. However, what all of these students have in common is that they all took the college assessment test and were placed into Basic Writing. If a student placed into Basic Writing, it is because his or her writing assessment lacked the organization, development, and sentence-level control needed to succeed in a

college-level writing course. This common placement into a developmental writing course is what unites this often widely diverse group of students.

In bringing these students together under the common goal of gaining the writing skills necessary to succeed in college, students learn that they share positive and negative experiences as writers and learners. For example, they learn that they seem to share a common past experience of being told (and then believing) that they are not good writers. They also learn that they are not alone in wanting to become stronger writers to move ahead in life. These commonalities are the building blocks for the learning community we build in Basic Writing. Over the course of the semester in Basic Writing, when students begin to realize they *can* write when given the tools, they form a community of writers who support and encourage each other. As a group, they overcome obstacles and misconceptions about themselves as learners and writers, and become more prepared for college-level work in the coming semesters.

Looping to an English Composition I class becomes a good fit for this group of students because it is a way to extend the learning community they have established in Basic Writing. In that community, they developed and met common goals and formed a mutual trust with each other. Often considered our most vulnerable population, developmental students who thrived in the tight-knit community created in a Basic Writing class would continue to thrive if that same community were allowed to stay in tact for the more challenging work that lies ahead in English Composition I. To put looping to the test, I arranged to loop with two cohorts of fall Basic Writing students who followed me to English Composition I courses in the spring. The first group had me as their instructor for the fall 2007 and spring 2008 semesters, and the second group had me as their instructor for the fall 2008 and spring 2009 semesters. In those two years of looping, I discovered many benefits in having my Basic Writing students loop with me to English Composition I.

### **Social Impact of Looping**

In his book, Paul George investigates why looping benefits his target student group, the adolescent student in middle school. Part of his investigation delves into the social-bonding theory and the theory of school membership. Both theories highlight the ways in which positive long-term relationships between students and teachers allow students to rise above the obstacles that impede their social and academic success in school. Some of these impediments include a lack of significant social connections to their peers or instructors. According to the theories, this lack of connection has been linked to student disengagement and poor academic performance. In short, the theories suggest that students who *do* develop healthy long-term relationships with their teachers and their peers experience a stronger sense of belonging to a group, which, in turn, leads to a stronger sense of “academic engagement and group membership” (George 10-13). Both of the theories George discusses center on the idea that the social-emotional atmosphere of a classroom can be used as a tool for generating student success in school. He writes:

The social-emotional tone of a school affects whether or not students attend school, how effectively they will learn, and how they choose to behave while present. Teachers can establish in long-term relationships with students a positive social-emotional tone that lasts long enough to make a substantial difference in the quality of the school experience for everyone. (George 13)

Building a strong long-term bond between teachers and students, it seems, is the key to building a productive social-emotional tone that promotes student success.

The reading I've done on looping further supports George's point on the social-emotional impact looping has on student success. Others who have done research on looping cite more specific social-emotional benefits for students. In an excerpt from her book, *Parent Handbook*, Jan Jubert provides a list of such benefits. In general, her list suggests that students who return to a looped class with the same instructor and the same peers feel significantly more connected to a learning community that fosters stability, familiarity, and a comfortable environment in which to take the risks one must take to learn new skills (Grant 37). This familiarity is a valuable tool for teachers as well. Several of the articles I read on looping suggested that the extended learning community produced by looping provided more teaching time and more time on task for students. Since students are already familiar with teacher expectations and his/her classroom management style, the "getting-to-know-you" stage is replaced with more learning time. Some estimate that a teacher will gain an extra month's worth of time in a looped class because the teacher and students are able to "pick up where they left off." The familiarity also allows for more informed contact between student and teacher. The teacher already knows his/her students' areas of strength, and can use this information to more effectively guide a student as he or she works to overcome any learning weaknesses (George 15; Ferrance 6; Grant 17).

In my looped class, I noticed similar results. In previous years when I taught a non-looped English Composition I, the first weeks of class were used to learn names, establish ground rules, and discover the learning styles and abilities of my new students. My first weeks of English Composition I in my looped classes were vastly different. On the first day of my looped Composition I classes, I was relaxed and excited to see my students again. They already knew me and my teaching style and I knew them and their learning styles, so we literally picked up where we left off in Basic Writing. We talked about the major assignments in Composition I and then we got right to work on their first essay assignment like we never missed a beat. I estimate that I gained an additional three weeks of teaching time in English Composition I due to looping. Barbara Stachniewicz, professor of English at NECC, conducted a focus group with my spring 2009 looped students. In her written report, she writes:

Every student present said that it was reassuring to begin English Composition I with a teacher they already know. The word that kept coming up was "comfortable." They believe they knew Clare's expectations and that she already knew their potential and individual learning/writing styles. This seemed to reduce much of the anxiety students can feel at the start of the semester.

According to Stachniewicz's focus-group report, the comfort level my students and I experienced in class helped students feel more at ease when sharing their work and opinions with their peers, and they were more willing to ask me for help sooner rather than later (Stachniewicz). Stachniewicz also writes in her report, "Students agreed that they felt much more comfortable with Clare than with other teachers they have. Some of this they attributed to her personality and style, but some to how much time they have had with her. Many felt more open to asking questions in this looped course than they do in other stand-alone courses."

While looping does not happen in any formal way at NECC, extended learning situations of all sorts do exist on campus. There are programs and situations at the college in which forms of looping

naturally occur, allowing NECC teachers and students to spend an entire academic year (or years) together. As part of my research, I interviewed several NECC professors from varying disciplines to discuss the extended student-teacher relationship they experienced with their students. The interview results showed that these professors experienced benefits similar to those I experienced in my formally looped classes. For example, Marcy Vozzella, Professor of Earth Sciences at NECC, explained that about 15% of the students who have her for one science class will follow her to the next semester to take a second class in the sequence. She says of her experience with such students:

Generally, the student that returns to my class comes into class the first day confident and comfortable. This means more often than not I can joke with them on the first day of class and make references to our time together and the student will speak about his/her experiences. This first class automatically makes the rest of the class more comfortable and we start out on a really positive note.

Marcy further states, “Personally, --I love the interactions of being able to ‘continue the conversation’ with a student and getting to know them on a more personal level.”

In addition to an increased comfort level, we all found that students in these extended learning situations seemed to take more responsibility inside the classroom for themselves and for each other. Sandra DeVellis, Professor Emeritus of Behavioral Sciences at NECC, noted these observations in the interview I had with her. Like Marcy, Sandra has had students who followed her from one semester to the next to continue with the second course in a sequence. She explained:

I did find those students who were in a more extended-contact situation, more likely to take some responsibility for what happened in the classroom. They were more likely to provide snacks when we had get-togethers, more likely to carpool when we had field trips and more often shared phone calls. They would know why someone was out of class, and take notes for them.

Like Sandra, I also noted that the students in my looped classes took more responsibility for each other and the activities in the classroom. I remember in the spring of 2008, one student admitted he was unprepared to attend my class and thought about skipping, but decided against it because, as he said, “I thought in my head, ‘Clare will *kill* me if I don’t come to class.’” He was a funny student, sort of a trouble maker in Basic Writing, but in English Composition I, he had learned to take himself and his work more seriously, and I was glad to see him take more responsibility for his missing work. My students would also text other students who were missing in class and then give me the report on whether the student was just running late or out for the day. They seemed to take the tasks we did in class more seriously than my non-looped English Composition I students. They were more involved in our class discussions and group activities. They were quick to get on task and to encourage each other to get the job done. Again, the idea of taking more responsibility in our class surfaced in moments like these. Similar to my observations and Sandra’s, Carol Wallace, Professor in the Radiologic Technology program, explained that due to the curriculum design of the program, faculty have the same group of students from semester to semester throughout their two-year program. Having this opportunity to work with the same group of students, Carol has observed that: “The students all get to know each other and there is a bonding that occurs. I believe that they all care about each other and students are not afraid to ask other students to help them. Often study groups are formed.”

It seems that when given extended contact with the same teacher and peers, students will learn more than content in the classroom. They will learn citizenship and take on a deeper responsibility for themselves and their work. As Dr. Paul George's work with looping and adolescent middle school students suggests, the social-emotional tone set by a looping situation is a powerful learning tool. Building strong social bonds in the college classroom over an extended period of time allows students and teachers to experience learning and growth inside a supportive social network that fosters risk taking, community involvement, and self-empowerment.

### The Impact of Looping on Student Performance and Retention

In English Composition I, student success is defined by the students who pass the course with a C or better. Using statistics provided by the Office for Research and Planning at NECC, I compared the completion rates of three groups of English Composition I students from spring 2008 and 2009, and it was determined that my looped students did perform better academically than their counterparts. (See figure 1 below.)

ALL instructors	Sp08	Sp09	both
# of All students registered for ENG 101 at end of add/drop	694	830	1524
# of above students who received a final grade	663	800	1463
# of above students who passed with C or better (excluding C-)	386	462	848
C or better %	56%	56%	56%
ALL instructors	Sp08	Sp09	both
# of BW students registered for ENG 101 at end of add/drop	180	294	474
# of above students who received a final grade	177	288	465
# of above students who passed with C or better (excluding C-)	135	178	313
C or better %	75%	61%	66%
Clare Thompson-Ostrander only	Sp08	Sp09	both
# of CTO's BW students registered for ENG 101 at end of add/drop	19	18	37
# of above students who received a final grade	19	18	37
# of above students who passed with C or better (excluding C-)	17	14	31
C or better %	89%	78%	84%

**Figure 1: Retention and Success Rates in English Composition I**

Out of 1,524, students who enrolled in English Composition I for the spring semesters of 2008 and 2009, 848 successfully completed the course with a C or better. Of those 848 students, 474 were former Basic Writing students. In combining the numbers for these students, a 66% success rate is found. Out of 474 former Basic Writers who took English Composition I, 313 completed the course successfully.

Of those 313 former Basic Writing students, 37 of them were enrolled in my looped English Composition I courses. When I combined the number of students enrolled in my looped courses, the success rate equals 84%. Out of 37 students who enrolled in the looped courses, 31 of them passed with a C or better. This pass-rate percentage is significantly better when you compare the success rates of the Basic Writers who enrolled in other stand-alone English Composition I courses. These statistics suggest that former Basic Writers are more successful in English Composition I than non-Basic Writing students. The statistics further reveal that the former Basic Writing students who looped into English Composition I experienced the highest rate of success. These initial statistics on looping are very good and indicate that it would be beneficial to put other looped courses in place at the college to determine if similar results will occur, particularly when developmental courses are looped with college-level courses.

While not as quantifiable as a completion grade, I believe student performance can also be measured by more qualitative observations made in the classroom. For example, when I observed the students in my looped classes and compared them to my students in my non-looped classes, I made these observations. In my looped class, I noticed that the students performed more effectively in groups, which led to more productive learning in the classroom; students were also more willing to ask questions and “demand” better explanations of concepts I presented to them in class; more students than I have ever had frequented my office hours to seek help or support; they were more likely to help and encourage each other; and, overwhelmingly, the students took more ownership of their academic work. I believe the social-emotional support students received from each other and their instructor in a looped class led to these positive academic behaviors, which resulted in the higher success rate for these particular students.

Sandra DeVellis made similar observations on student performance in her extended- learning situation. She remarked that it was a challenge to assess the impact the extended learning situation had on her students’ performance because she did not have quantitative data to support her subjective impressions; however, she did note that:

They [the students] wanted to be there, and in that way I think they were more open to learn more, less resistant, less guarded. It is my sense that they could put more energy into learning when they didn’t need to put energy into getting used to the teacher, the expectations, and all of their classmates. The sense of familiarity I think helped them focus more on the material.

As Sandra and I noticed, familiarity with the teacher and peers over an extended period of time allowed for more productive learning time spent in class. Students appeared more focused on their learning. Marcy Vozzella also noted that in those classes in which she had more returning students (whom she refers to as her “extended students”), the performance rate of the entire class would increase. She attributes this performance increase to the extended students’ familiarity with her and her teaching style. Since the extended students knew Marcy’s teaching style and felt more comfortable in her classroom, they took the students who were new to Marcy under their wings (Vozzella). Marcy commented, “I have heard the extended students offer a ton of advice to the new students about how to study for my exams and say things like, ‘She isn’t kidding, you know—if you don’t do the weekly assignments it will kill your grade so DO THEM!’”

Professor of Nursing Health Professions at NECC, Catherine (Kitty) Debrowski also discussed classroom practices that foster positive student performance and retention in the demanding and highly

selective Nursing program. The students in the Nursing program have a close student-faculty relationship for two years. In those two years, the students attend classes and work through their clinical rotations with the constant support of the faculty members and their peers. Kitty offered insights into the strategies she and other faculty members use to increase student performance and retention. She explains that because of the extended student-faculty relationship:

We are very aware of each student's strengths and areas of weakness in both the clinical and academic settings. Faculty on each level are involved in Learning Enrichment Groups (LEGs) for students to assist them with their academic standing. These groups consist of case studies, modules practice exams, test-taking techniques, and stress-management tips. In the clinical area, we work with groups of 8 students for a period of 5-7 weeks at a time. If students experience difficulty with clinical skills they are encouraged to return to the lab for remediation to improve their clinical performance. These activities are to enhance student retention in the program. Many of our students are in stages of their lives where they are raising children, caring for aging parents, and experiencing many other life changes. The relationship with faculty is supportive and helpful during these times of stress.

The common thread in each of the strategies Kitty lists above is the extended connection a student has with a faculty member. It is through this relationship that faculty members are able to intervene holistically and offer students the help and support they need to remain in the program.

A final note on retention: I did lose four students of the thirty-seven, and had two who completed the course, but did so without earning a passing grade. Like all of us who teach at NECC, I am concerned with retention and will often wrack my brains to figure out why so many of our students leave. Most semesters, I am left with more questions than answers, but in my looped classes, I learned *why* my four students had to leave. One student lost her father and then her uncle within the year that I had her in my classes, another student suffered a bout of severe depression and was advised by his doctor to leave college to get well again, and two of them felt overwhelmed by the demands of English Composition I and decided to drop the course. The two students who remained in class for the entire semester, but still did not earn a passing grade, had similar stories. One student suffered a depressive episode in the last three weeks of class, and while she came to every class because she felt connected to all of us, she could not produce her final research essay with competency; the other student who remained in class could not complete the final research essay, even with the additional support of her teacher. She also came to every class to remain connected to her classmates, particularly her good friend, who did pass the course. This information was very useful to me. I had answers and those answers made me feel more connected to these students and more confident in myself as an instructor, for I knew that I truly had done all that I could to support them. I also feel that by knowing my students, I was able to intervene more effectively when I sensed a student was about to give up. I do not have quantitative data to support this claim, but I did have a number of students who wanted to give up. Because we connected and talked about their options, they stayed and completed the course successfully. I credit looping for these conversations because it allowed me the time to know my students, and for them to know and trust me with their concerns.

It is this researcher's belief that to fully measure student performance and retention rates, one must not only look at statistics and pass rates, but also at the conditions inside of the classrooms in which these positive pass rates have occurred. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that extended time with their instructors and their peers produces a supportive learning environment that fosters stronger academic performances in students.

### **The Continuous Curriculum That Emerges Through Looping**

The continuous curriculum is another benefit highlighted by those who have experienced and researched looping as an educational practice (Grant; Jacoby 19; George 15). These researchers determined that during their extended time with the same students in a looping situation, both teachers and students had the unique opportunity to establish a solid foundation of shared knowledge and common skills from which to build new learning experiences and skills mastery set by a more demanding curriculum. I also took advantage of the continuous curriculum during the extended time I shared with my looped students. In Basic Writing, my students learn about the writing process, the basic format of an essay, and various basic methods of development. I capitalized on these three areas to create clear connections between the Basic Writing curriculum and the English Composition I curriculum. These are the connections we built between the two courses:

- **We established a shared writing routine.** We used the same writing routine and writing process learned in Basic Writing to compose essays in English Composition I. For example, in Basic Writing, students learned many prewriting, revising, and editing strategies; they also developed a more disciplined writing routine. In English Composition I, the students continued to use their writing process and routine to compose their college-level essays. Using the same approach to writing in English Composition I reinforced and strengthened the skills and writing practices the students learned in Basic Writing.
- **We developed a common language about writing.** We used the writing terminology we gained in Basic Writing in English Composition I. For example, every student in my looped English Composition I classes knew what I meant by the terms "thesis statement" and "topic sentence." They knew what I meant when I said, "We are going to block our essays." (Blocking is a method we used to organize ideas in Basic Writing.) Or, when I asked them to create a four square about their topics, they immediately broke up into groups and got to work. (A four square is a visual tool we used to explore a concept). We shared a common language to discuss and learn new writing skills, and this common language allowed students to tap into their prior knowledge so that they could develop more advanced writing and critical-thinking skills.
- **I built clear connections between essay assignments in Basic Writing and English Composition I.** The most obvious example is the object essay I assigned in both Basic Writing and English Composition I. In Basic Writing, the object essay pushes students to learn basic methods of development such as using sensory description and anecdotal evidence to develop an organized essay about an object that holds significance in their lives. In Composition I, the object essay requires students to use the sensory description and anecdotal evidence, but combine them with new methods of development that include incorporating

researched evidence and a more critical analysis of the object's significance to their family's heritage or value system. (In English Composition I, students were required to choose a different topic than was used in their Basic Writing object essays.) Building bridges between essay assignments in Basic Writing and English Composition I gave students the opportunity to build on their established strengths as writers. They were more willing to take risks and get their work done because they had already established some of the skills needed to complete the more challenging assignment. It also gave me an amazing teaching tool. When a student was unsure and anxious about completing a difficult assignment, I was able to point out concrete reasons why they could do the assignment. Instead of my *telling* them they had the skills to get the job done, I could *show* them because they had already demonstrated the skills needed in their Basic Writing work. I found the bridges between assignments to be the most powerful benefit of the continuous curriculum.

Students in my classes also observed the benefits of the continuous curriculum. They felt the clearly identified connections between the work they accomplished in Basic Writing and English Composition I were very helpful (Stachniewicz). One student said, "Miss O gave us a lot of work that had to be done using the same materials from Basic Writing." Another student commented that, "The class [English Composition I] was like one big class instead of two different classes." Another student said, "The material that I learned in Basic Writing blended well with the material from English Composition I. We still used the prewriting and revision skills, which we learned in Basic Writing." Another student commented, "We are still writing essays and a lot of the same rules apply, you know, like thesis statements, conclusions, intro's, all that good stuff." In general, students commented that using the same writing tools and strategies learned in Basic Writing made the work they did in English Composition I less intimidating (Stachniewicz). In a looped class, Basic Writing is an obvious stepping stone for English Composition I, and as an instructor of a looped course, I was able to capitalize on and develop a stronger, year long writing curriculum that made the transition to college-level writing more productive and less intimidating for students.

### **The Concerns I Encountered with Looping**

Typically, when I taught stand-alone English Composition I courses in the past, I would be more likely to have balanced student population in terms of academic preparedness and college assessment scores. In addition to having former developmental students in my English Composition I course, I would also have students who did not need developmental reading, writing, or math, students who were well prepared to take my college-level writing course right off the street. In theory, this balance in the student makeup is often a benefit because the stronger students would lead by example and raise the bar for the weaker students. In my looped class, however, this balance was not there. All of the students in my looped English Composition I classes needed developmental writing, and 20 out of the 37 also needed to take developmental reading courses as well before they could take my English Composition I course. When I first introduced the idea of looping to my colleagues at NECC, some were concerned about this lack of academic diversity in a looped classroom, and at first, I have to admit, I was concerned, too. I worried that the students in the looped class would not have the built-in role models found in a stand-alone English Composition I course.

However, as the looped sections of my English Composition I courses progressed, student leaders emerged and were on par with other student leaders I had in my stand-alone English Composition I courses. Students in my looped classes were able to demonstrate high competency in their research and writing, as seen below is an excerpt taken from a looped student's final research essay:

Additionally, in today's world, human trafficking is a very widespread industry which makes it easier for traffickers to find their good amount of innocent victims. In his article, "Human Trafficking and Slavery," Masci describes how many people fall into the world of trafficking and the awful things they are made to do. Masci writes, "Between 18,000 to 20,000 people are trafficked into the United States each year...many women and children are kidnapped or lured...once they arrive, they are stripped of their passports and forced to work as sex slaves, laborers or domestic servants until their smuggling or travel 'debts' are paid." Traffickers in today's society take advantage of the fact that some people are poor and need help. The traffickers lend money to a poor person, but in return that person has to work for the trafficker in the job that the trafficker picks out for them (Masci). If the victim is put to work as a sex slave, the trafficker will never put the victim to have sex with the same customer. The victim is moved around to different men so that neither of them can form a type of relationship in which it can jeopardize the trafficker's business or chances of getting caught. (Davis)

In this paragraph, the looped student demonstrates many of the research and writing skills taught in the English Composition I research essay. She is able to competently introduce, integrate, and properly cite both quoted and paraphrased researched evidence to support her own ideas on human trafficking. And, though English is her second language, she demonstrates a remarkable command of grammar and punctuation. This student, among others, emerged as a leader in my looped class, and my concerns about the lack of student leadership in my looped classes disappeared.

However, though I had a number of student leaders in my classes, I did have a large number of students who struggled at first to grasp the more difficult concepts presented in English Composition I. For example, in my stand-alone English Composition I courses, I spend about four class hours on the concept and skill of paraphrasing. I found that for a majority of my looped students, four hours was not sufficient. They needed more direction and more scaffolding in place to fully grasp the skill of paraphrasing (including the student mentioned above). As an instructor, I was forced to find another way to teach paraphrasing, and I did. By the end of the paraphrase unit, almost all the students could demonstrate competent paraphrasing skills. Overall, I did find my looped students needed more time on task in class and more direction when learning more complicated writing and research skills. However, I did not see this as a detriment to the group. Instead, I saw it as an incredible opportunity for myself as an instructor and for the students. As an instructor, my approach to teaching a familiar course had to evolve, and because the students were comfortable with me and each other, they were more willing to speak up and even demand more clarification from me on the concepts they did not fully understand. I became a more effective teacher and they became more empowered and effective as students.

In the research on looping, a bad fit between the instructor and student was a possible concern. Sandra DeVellis mentioned this as a concern she shared. While most of her extended experiences with students were positive, she did mention that, at times, a student who did not do well in one of her courses

would return to retake it with her or take another course that she taught. She explains, “I certainly try to have each experience be a positive one, but remembering the past difficulties and trying to have a good attitude was not enough to ensure success. In these circumstances, I wished we did not have an extended relationship.” Marcy Vozzella also noted that there are times when her returning students seem to take advantage of the comfort and familiarity they shared through their extended relationship. She said, “I have had a few instances where the student thinks they know me really well and therefore can get away with not doing the work.” Like Sandra and Marcy, I also experience the downside of a student’s familiarity with me as his or her instructor. About midway through both of my semesters teaching English Composition I to my loopers, I did get the sense that students were not working at the level I expected of them. I did get the sense that they were slacking a bit because they were comfortable with me and my teaching style. Though I was clearly the leader among them, we were like a group of friends. This midsemester slump is also very common in stand-alone English Composition I courses, but it really bothered me when it happened in my looped course. It felt more personal when students arrived to class unprepared to share their outlines or their research sources. To address the concern, I asked the students to fill out an anonymous survey to gauge their honest commitment to the research essay work I had assigned. I used the results of this blind survey to open a discussion about my role as an evaluator of their work. I was very pointed in my discussion because the students needed to understand that no matter how much I liked them as students, they needed to demonstrate the required skills of the research essay to pass the course. I found this discussion very helpful and the majority of the students responded by stepping up their commitment and producing competent research essays.

Teaching objectively became another possible concern that arose within my looping experience. At times, I wondered if I could maintain my objectivity while working so closely with this population of students. To mitigate this concern, I relied more heavily on grading rubrics. They became the standard to which I held myself and my students. I have always used grading rubrics in my classes, and I have always had students use them as learning tools; however, with this group, rubrics became more significant because not only was I holding my students to them, I was also holding my evaluation of their work to them. If I did not see the skills outlined by the rubric in the students’ essays, the students did not receive points toward their grades. As a result, I believe I actually graded more critically with this group of students, but I was also more willing to give a student the chance to improve his or her grade if the grade was not passing.

As with any educational initiative, there are concerns and drawbacks. In the case of looping, teaching a homogeneous group, managing the double edge of a familiar and comfortable classroom, and maintaining teacher objectivity are the concerns I recognized and addressed in my looped classes. Though these concerns exist, they are manageable and, in dealing with them, I became a more effective teacher. Overall, when the concerns over looping are weighed against the more significant social and academic benefits of looping, it becomes clear that looping is an educational practice that merits further experimentation and exploration. In looping, there is more potential for good than bad and from the good and bad, more opportunities for learning experiences that foster professional enrichment in teachers and a powerful learning experience for their students.

## **Conclusion**

I remember when I first got the idea for looping. It was a late April afternoon and I was sitting at one of those round white tables outside of L200 grading essays. I sat there for about forty-five minutes, and in

that time, the three empty chairs at the table where I sat were taken away. A number of students wearing scrubs had begun to assemble into a group at the tables across from me and they needed more chairs, so they took the empty ones around the table where I sat. Because of the scrubs, I assumed they were nursing students. At first, only a couple of students were there, but within fifteen minutes, there were about twelve students gathered around the tables, with more on the way. As I sat grading my students' essays, I felt myself eavesdropping on those nursing students. They all knew each other, casually joked with one another and, a couple of times, one of them would relay a text message that another would be joining them soon. They talked mostly about the content of their courses. (If I remember correctly, they were studying diseases.) Through their talk about diseases, it became clear that these students knew each other very well and that they cared for one another. In between the talk of diseases, they encouraged each other and referred to more personal aspects of each other's lives (sick children, demanding jobs, etc). I knew that nursing students stayed together with the same peers and teachers for two years, and my hunch was that the comfortable, supportive conversation they shared with each other that afternoon was a product of that extended time together. While I sat listening, I wondered what would happen if my Basic Writers had the chance to stay together for more than one semester. Would they experience better learning or outcomes? Would they form supportive friendships with each other as the nursing students had? What sort of experience could we create if we all stayed together for English Composition I? This moment of eavesdropping on a bunch of nursing students became the seed for looping.

I am grateful to those nursing students and for the experience I gained through looping with my Basic Writing students. It has been the most powerful teaching experience of my career. I am a motivated teacher by nature, but my enthusiasm for teaching was raised to a new level. I was even more invested, more concerned for each student's individual outcome, and I felt more challenged to find new ways to teach material I have taught for years. I was also more relaxed; walking into my looped classes was like walking into a home where familiarity, comfort, and learning decorated the walls. I believe the students felt the same way. We had created a community of learners and that community made, as Paul George would say, a big school feel small.

When surveyed anonymously, the looped students were asked if they would recommend looping to other students. Some of their responses were as follows:

- Yes, because there are a lot of advantages for the student and they will be more comfortable with the teacher, classmates and course material.
- Yes, because your Basic Writing teacher knows your strengths and weaknesses and she will work on the things that you need the most help with.
- The benefit of looping for me is that I felt more comfortable with the teacher and I felt like I can open up more with her when I needed help on a paper.
- Yes, because you get to actually know your professor and classmates.
- The benefits for looping are that u feel more secure to speak your mind because you know the other students and you aren't nervous.
- It is more comfortable and familiar. It lets you have a better connection with the instructor and fellow students. In return, this makes learning better because you are more open with activity concerning sharing opinions, readings and work.

I look forward to meeting my next group of loopers next fall. I will do it even better next time, will forge a tighter connection between Basic Writing and Composition I, will invest in more ways to build an even

stronger learning community, and will work harder to mitigate any of the snags that come along with the extended relationship I'll share with my next group.

For me and my students, looping worked. It offered three key advantages: a supportive learning atmosphere in the classroom, a higher percentage of retention and student success, and a stronger connection between developmental and college-level curricula. For all of these reasons, I will end by making recommendations for looping at NECC.

### Recommendations

- More documented and researched experimentation with looping is needed. I would recommend that more loops between developmental courses and college-level courses be put in place at NECC. Developmental students are our most at-risk group at the college, and looping may provide the supportive social and learning network needed to improve a developmental student's success in college-level courses. Tying into the college's Achieving the Dream initiative, my experiment with looping shows great promise for other potential loops. According to Achieving the Dream's student-centered vision outlined in the article, "Success is What Matters," the initiative seeks to increase the number of students who:
  - Complete developmental courses and move on to credit bearing courses.
  - Enroll in and complete gatekeeper courses (like English Composition I).
  - Complete the courses they take, earning a grade of C or better.
  - Re-enroll from one semester to the next.
  - Earn certificates and degrees.

Eighty-four percent of the students who looped from Basic Writing to English Composition met four Achieving the Dream goals. It is worthwhile to explore looping and the potential it may have for other developmental students who will make the challenging transition into college level work--work that will ultimately bring them closer to earning their degrees and certificates.

- More organizational arrangements that support looping are also needed. Ideally, the fall semester of a looped class will meet on the *same days* and at the *same time* as the second part of the loop in the spring semester. However, it is difficult to create this loop because the schedules for both faculty and students are set semester-to-semester, rather than annually. Currently, NECC is taking steps to transition from semester-to-semester to annual scheduling for faculty and students. Initiatives like the ePortfolio will allow students to plan (though not officially register) for classes for an entire academic year, and to make scheduling an easier process for faculty, members are now allowed to submit their schedule requests for an entire academic year, rather than at the end of each semester. There are significant obstacles, though, in making these year-long schedule plans official. For students, there are academic and financial obstacles that could impede their ability to keep a year-long schedule. A student may not pass or complete a course in the fall and will be unable to take the next sequential course in the spring, or a student may not have the funds or financial aid to take any courses in the subsequent semester. Financial aid is allotted on a semester-to-semester basis, not annually. For faculty, the barriers to a set annual schedule include contractual requirements that make it impossible for a faculty member to know for certain whether he or she can teach the desired course in the following semester (Glenn).

I don't have an answer for making looping work inside the barriers of scheduling. I only know that I did make it happen. My approach was hands-on and collaborative. I made my own process by working with the students, with the Dean of Academic Advising and with the Deans of my department and of the English Department. It is possible to make looping work using a grassroots approach and there are good reasons to explore and implement looping at the college level. Dr. Paul George writes:

There are, then, a good many and quite varied reasons to implement organizational arrangements that create a sense of smallness and permit long-term relationships between teachers and students, and among students themselves. Academic engagement, positive personal development, and group citizenship may all develop more effectively in schools where students feel attached, involved and committed. (17)

Creating a sense of smallness in a big school is the cornerstone of looping. Through looping, students build stronger connections with their teachers, their peers and a deeper investment in their own academic success. Should looping become a more accepted and recognized practice at the college, an annual schedule would need to be in place for students and faculty; even if this annual schedule were not set in stone, a reservation of sorts would work to keep a loop alive and thriving from semester to semester.

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