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Sabbatical Report: Spring 2016
El Camino College
The Wilson Reading System

My Spring 2016 Sabbatical from El Camino College (ECC) centered on the process of assisting a student, readily considered to be extremely dyslexic, to develop a reliable lexicon, that is, a system of “sound/symbol correspondence,” essential for accurate decoding or word recognition. Towards this end, I completed seven academic units offered cooperatively by the Wilson Reading System (WRS) and Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts (transcripts submitted), as well as the hours required for my three-unit Practicum. The Practicum units will be reported by WRS according to their timetable, i.e., by January 7, 2017, one year following my official start date. My academic courses centered on the Steps 1—6 of WRS and on the topics of diagnostic teaching, appropriate pacing of reading instruction, vocabulary acquisition at home and in school, fluency / prosody, dyslexia and the brain, comprehension strategies, differentiation of focus in reading instruction, spelling, and handwriting. My hope was to discover how I might adapt WRS to Reading classes, such as to “Educational Development 35: Reading Skills for Students with Learning Differences,” which I teach, and to share my findings with the ECC Reading Success Center and/or with any interested instructor(s) of English 80 and 82, courses in which students may need to improve their decoding skills before being able to focus on comprehension.

I chose an appropriate and highly motivated student who was approved by the Dean of Health Sciences and Athletics and the Vice-President of Human Resources. This student was willing to meet with me for three ninety-minute sessions per week; he signed a consent form acknowledging that he would not receive college units or payment for his time. In his early years

at home, the student (now in his twenties) had spoken and heard Spanish, only. He attempted to learn English from watching television, yet he started elementary school and commenced reading instruction without a “bank account of sounds,” i.e., he lacked phonological awareness of the English language. Over the years, the student coped by using screen readers or other technology to access the content of print. Through his impressive self-regulation and his appropriate use of accommodations, he adapted as best he could to the challenges of school and to his difficulties with reading. Enrolling in college took some courage on his part, yet at the start of Spring ’16, his degree applicable GPA was 3.2, and his transfer GPA was 3.0. He had earned A’s in Math 73 and in a number of Art classes. Given his career goal of becoming a teacher, he wanted to be able to read independently, i.e., to decode on his own rather than using technology. Earlier (in 2014), the student had been assessed in the ECC Special Resource Center on the cognitive and achievement instruments approved by the Chancellor’s Office; the results indicated that he was eligible for services related to learning disabilities. Specifically, on the WAIS--IV (Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales--IV), the student’s Verbal Comprehension Index or VCI Standard Score was average (SS 98), with a high average Perceptual Reasoning Index or PRI (SS 111). The student’s Processing Speed Index or PSI, a visual aptitude, was also high average, with his only low average score being his Working Memory Index or WMI, an auditory measure. Despite his ability, the student’s Reading achievement scores in standardized tests, namely the subtests of the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement III (WJ III), placed him at or below the first percentile in word attack, spelling, and other phonological / orthographic skills. The student took and passed five Reading classes at ECC (two SRC Reading Skills classes as well as English 80, 82, and 84), but his problems with decoding and spelling persisted.

The student and I started our preparation in December 2015, completing the WRS Word

Identification and Spelling Test (WIST), in order to be ready for our first lesson, WRS Step 1.3, on January 19, 2016. We were supported in this effort by the hospitality of Schauerman Library, which provided us with a first floor study room twice a week. For our third meeting each week, the student and I would either reserve an upstairs group study room at Schauerman or meet at a branch location of the Los Angeles Public Library. I prepared a lesson plan for each and every meeting. Meanwhile, I was completing my seven units of academic coursework--through a combination of face-to-face and on-line instruction--with a 4.0 GPA. My year-long practicum has been and continues to be supervised through SKYPE sessions with a Certified Wilson Trainer, supported by Wilson Literacy Specialists who are available to me five days a week by phone or online. The scope and sequence of WRS instruction starts with predictable closed syllables in both real and nonsense words, then moving on to more complex word constructs. At the outset of my work with my student, sound/symbol correspondence included the short vowels, single sounds for consonants, digraphs, nasal welds such as am, an, ong, and closed syllables: both the rule and the exceptions. Over the past nine months, we have progressed to multi-syllabic words, including words affected by “schwa” on the unstressed syllable, as well as the suffixes “s,” “ing,” and “ed.” Current status finds us at the syllable type called “vce,” or “vowel / consonant / silent e.” The student has worked assiduously to learn to decode both real and nonsense words, rather than guessing or relying on memory, as he had done prior to WRS training. The blocks of each ninety minute WRS lesson are designed to develop a student’s decoding, encoding, and comprehension/fluency skills. The WRS teaching / learning modalities have included aural /oral, visual and kinesthetic, as per Orton-Gillingham guidelines. Lesson components include manipulating letter tiles and syllable cards, tapping phonemes and/or syllables, scooping phrases with a marker for appropriate phrasing, “sky-writing” sight words to

generate muscle memory, writing from dictation, and retelling the content of reading passages. Assessment is ongoing as the student works towards automaticity at the word level and fluency at the sentence and passage levels.

The student is now at WRS Sub-step 4.1, with “4.2” being the target for instructor certification as a Wilson Dyslexia Specialist. We continue to work three times a week, outside my paid assignment time, in pursuit of that goal. Even after my certification, I hope and plan to continue working with the student towards mastery of all six syllable types found in the English language, i.e., at least through WRS Step 6, if not higher (there are twelve Steps). Our work continues to be intriguing and satisfying to me; I am grateful to my student for his obvious commitment and determination. I would state with both humility and pride that our work seems to have bolstered his already strong student skills as well as his confidence in himself as a student, evidenced in part by his high GPA in Spring ’16, placing him on the “Dean’s Honor List” and giving him the courage to apply for the ECC Honors Transfer Program.

There is no doubt in my mind as to the efficacy of the Wilson Reading System, designed almost thirty years ago for adults with dyslexia. The question which lingers is how to “translate” the instructional practices, so effective at the individual level, to a classroom in which any number of reading levels and a wide variety of reading challenges may prevail—not to mention enrollments of 25—35 students and a time limit of sixteen weeks per semester. At this juncture, Wilson Reading System is adamant about delivery of the program with copyrighted materials, only, and firm in its objection to use of the Smart Board or other electronic means. Technology would admittedly allow wider access, yet Wilson’s objections, both pedagogical and proprietary, are understandable.

Many scholars have observed that oral communication may be instinctual but that reading

is a contrivance, a marvel of the human brain. Those of us who learned to read with relative ease may not readily grasp the frustration and pain experienced by those for whom reading is inordinately difficult. My sabbatical gave me a “window” into the challenges which many people face as they attempt to learn to read English, a language with a deep orthography, informed by the often conflicting spelling rules of several other languages. My goal is to make that process easier and more attainable so that students may learn to read and then read to learn as they pursue their educational goals and their chosen road to success in life.

For now, I will continue my pursuit of WRS curriculum mastery as well as my exploration of feasible and legal adaptation of this program to group instruction through interaction with fellow WRS instructors, ECC colleagues, and fellow Learning Disabilities Specialists and Educational Therapists. I am very grateful to El Camino College and to my student for the learning opportunity provided by my sabbatical.

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