

## INTEGRATING TWO PERSPECTIVES ON OBSTACLES TO STUDENT LEARNING: A REAL AHA! MOMENT



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One afternoon in the fall of 2018, two faculty members sat down to discuss the cornerstone research assignment for the Foundations of Education course, EDU 101, and the ways students have been navigating that assignment. One was the instructor for multiple sections of the course (Sarah), and the other the library liaison for Early Childhood Education (Linda). That afternoon, what began as a routine check-in became revelatory for both of us. Sarah and her colleagues could tell that students were struggling with specific aspects of the assignment, based on questions in class and papers submitted, while Linda and other faculty librarians had gathered impressions from a different perspective, via countless one-on-one interactions at the library reference desk with students who were struggling to understand the assignment and meet professors' expectations. Among the things that came to light that day was the idea that many students didn't fully grasp a key concept behind a "pro and con" research assignment—the idea that expert opinion is not always unanimous. The "Buzzword Assignment," as it is called, asks students to select a topic from a list of current issues in early childhood education, find and analyze a certain number of sources on the topic and, through a series of scaffolded steps, produce a research paper that covers the background and arguments on both sides of the issue.

Drawing on anecdotal evidence shared among reference librarians, Linda was able to describe students' difficulties with the simplified directive to find three pro articles and three con articles—since most academic sources on any topic will naturally lay out all sides of an issue before offering evidence or reasoning to advocate for one side or another.

Sarah realized that she was making some inaccurate assumptions about students' understanding that were undermining their ability to succeed with this assignment. Scholars at Indiana University have written about the process of "decoding" a discipline, whereby faculty members, who are experts in their fields, work to identify the "bottlenecks" that keep students, as novice scholars, from successfully completing their academic assignments (Díaz, Middendorf, Pace, & Shopkow, 2008). Some bottlenecks develop because of students' lack of understanding of what Meyer and Land call "threshold concepts" (2012), the foundational understandings that allow experts in a discipline to succeed at the highest level, concepts that we, as faculty, have picked up along the way but may not even remember lacking as novices. In this vein, Sarah has learned not to start with the idea of "pro and con," but to begin by talking about expert knowledge and opinion, and then introduce the notion that experts may have conflicting perspectives on the same evidence, or may prioritize different kinds of evidence in their analyses.

As we shared impressions of students' struggles with the Buzzword Assignment, we also realized it was time to pause, and back up, and redesign our approach to supporting students' research process. We saw that what students really needed was support for something that had largely been left out of the equation: critical reading. Students don't necessarily come to college ready to navigate academic and scholarly documents, focus on what's important, pull out the information

that matches their need, and ask questions of the material based on prior knowledge and an informed worldview. They need to learn these strategies and practice them.

Back in May of 2018, we had both participated in the workshop sponsored by the Hostos Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program featuring Steven Pearlman and David Carillo of The Critical Thinking Initiative (<https://www.thecriticalthinking-initiative.org/>). About three months later, on that fateful date in fall of 2018, Linda shared with Sarah a critical reading activity design she had developed during the WAC workshop, and the two discussed their interest in the material presented by Pearlman and Carillo. Together they designed a sequence of critical reading/writing activities, which Sarah was able to pilot in two sections of EDU 101 that fall, revise and use again in multiple sections in spring of 2019.

The sequence of activities that emerged through these iterations further scaffolds an already scaffolded research assignment, and multiple steps in the process are supported by material in an online guide that Linda has customized (<http://guides.hostos.cuny.edu/EDU101>), with links and instructions for carrying out the various stages in the process. Early in the semester, Sarah gives students an article and asks them to apply the critical reading activity Linda had developed, which directs them to notice how the author covers the complexity of the topic, discussing: 1) what is the main point of the article; 2) what is unknown or under debate; 3) how does the author weigh evidence; and 4) do they draw conclusions? The structure was “I (Sarah) do it with you,” “you do it in groups,” then “you do it individually.” They used highlighting, margin notes, sticky notes, special icons or symbols, etc. on the article itself. They are already practicing critical reading even before being prompted to search for sources on their own.

Then, once students have chosen a topic, they are directed to a database full of expert encyclopedia articles, beginning to discover strategies for finding sources as they seek to gather background information. Again, instructions and links for this

part of the research process are in the online guide for the course. Locating a relevant article, they once again apply the critical reading activity. These steps are repeated as students do another critical reading of an article they have found using a specific Google search technique that helps them locate credible news articles—again, instructions available to students in the online guide. Sarah also has them keep these annotated documents in a special folder they bring to class each day. They reference them throughout the semester.

At this juncture—when students have already done some database and Internet searching, developed some background knowledge, and practiced a method for critical reading multiple times, Linda and Sarah co-facilitate a library instruction session where students practice strategies for breaking apart and managing a topic, developing keywords and search queries, using the Hostos Library’s OneSearch tool to locate articles, and performing preliminary evaluation of sources. Linda has noticed a marked improvement in students’ preparedness to participate in these workshop activities, compared with students in previous semesters. This is anecdotal at this point, but what we’ve found is very encouraging. Following the workshop, in addition to reviewing students’ work at each scaffolded stage of the assignment, Sarah covers in class how to use concept mapping to organize a paper, how to paraphrase, and how to construct a strong paragraph. Across nearly two semesters, Sarah has noticed an improvement in students’ research papers, and she and Linda will be analyzing student work in a more formal way in the coming year.

## References

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## BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Linda Miles is Assistant Professor, OER Librarian, and Liaison Librarian to the faculty of Early Childhood Education and the Visual and Performing Arts. Before coming to Hostos, she served for four years as Public Services and User Experience Librarian at Yeshiva University, and began her career in the library of the Lincoln Center Institute, an arts education organization. Recent publications include "But What Do the Students Think: Results of the CUNY Cross-Campus Zero-Textbook Cost Student Survey" (*Open Praxis*, 11(1), 2019) and "Egalitarian Teams in Action: Organizing for Library Initiatives" (*Urban Library Journal*, 32(2), 2017). She is currently co-authoring a book, *How to Thrive as a Library Professional: Achieving Success and Satisfaction*, for Libraries Unlimited (Oct 2019). Linda received an Early-career Librarian Scholarship from ACRL (2017) and an IMLS Laura Bush 21st-Century Librarian Scholarship (2009-11). She holds an MLS from St. John's University and a PhD in theatre history and criticism from the University of Texas at Austin. Linda's current research interests include students' reading and college-readiness, and game design for media literacy instruction.

## BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Prof. Church is Assistant Professor and Chair of Education Department. As a member of the faculty, Prof. Church teaches courses in the Foundations of Education, Language Arts for Young Children, Multicultural Education, Special Education, and Child Development. In her role as Chair, she serves on the College Wide P&B, Chairs, Coordinators and Directors Committee, and the Academic Council. She is a member of the Senate Budget and Finance Committee and the Allied Health Retention Committee. For the Education Department, she chairs the department's P&B and Curriculum Committees. With Medgar Evers College she was instrumental in producing an Early Childhood Education degree articulation agreement with their Education Department. For the Early Childhood Education Unit, she is the liaison for the JumpStart! Partnership, which places students in Bronx public schools for their internships.

## TITLE V

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