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Strengthening College Students' Success through the RAC

This article describes how Fayetteville State University's Reading Across the Curriculum (RAC) model developed for use with underprepared students can effectively improve the literacy and academic language skills of those students. The primary goals and objectives of the RAC program are to train faculty members from various disciplines to create more reading comprehension-centered courses and to decrease "aliteracy" among students by increasing the amount of reading and thereby improving their students' reading comprehension skills. This study demonstrates clearly that the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project results in significant improvement in students' performance outcomes.

The purpose of this article is to describe the components of the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project, an ongoing research project developed to improve the reading comprehension skills of students at Fayetteville State University. Seven university courses met the program requirements, and subsequent findings indicated that the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project provided a model for focusing attention on students' lack of reading comprehension skills and helped faculty members to implement effective reading comprehension strategies in their courses in an effort to address this problem.

Faculty Course Revision Project

Recent statistics as they relate to literacy in the United States are alarming. Since 1983, more than ten million Americans have reached twelfth grade without having learned to read at a basic level. Twenty-one million Americans cannot read at all. Recent statistics indicate that 32 million U.S. adults are unable to read a newspaper or instructions on a pill bottle (Britt, 2009). Furthermore, the reading proficiency of college students has declined over

the years partly because of the lack of reading materials at home and competition from technology, including television, video games and the Internet. Although more Americans apply for college admission and graduate from college, fewer leave college with the skills needed to understand routine data. Also, 20% of first-year college students are placed in remedial reading classes or reading assistance labs ("Grim Illiteracy," 2007).

Technically, high school graduates vacation for only two to three months before entering college, and bridging the gap between high school and college is a challenge, particularly for students who are underprepared (Giuliano & Sullivan, 2007). A study released by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006 revealed that 41% of college professors thought that students were not prepared for college-level reading and had poor reading comprehension while only 15% of high school teachers agreed (Sanoff, 2006), indicating a disconnect, which has hindered the continuity of literacy instruction between K-12 and university classrooms (Eckert, 2008). Therefore, the need to address the problem of college students' reading comprehension skills is critical.

Because reading and reading comprehension are integral parts of all disciplines, all teachers, including university professors, should be willing to teach reading comprehension skills apropos to their specific disciplines. Students in every classroom need to be able to understand word problems, comprehend difficult texts, and even communicate their own emotions and ideas to lead full and productive lives (Morse, 2008). In *I Read It, But I Don't Get it: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*, Chris Tovani (2000) challenged the notion that students have been taught to read purposefully in elementary school. Reading encapsulates more than the ability to pronounce words from left to right; it also includes the ability to extrapolate implicit and explicit meanings from those words, form judgments about those words, and connect them to other texts. It is "the psycholinguistic processes of getting meaning from or putting meaning into print and/or sound, images, and movement, on a page or screen, used for the purposes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (Horning, 2007, para. 4). Thus, teachers of adolescent readers need to be adept in teaching students to read for a purpose, to build upon their background knowledge, and to use strategies to better comprehend texts, all of which extend far beyond basic reading (Tovani, 2000). Many students, particularly college students, are not forthcoming about their difficulties in understanding textbook material. So, they may become defensive or even offer excuses for not examining the material more closely. Thus, like adolescent

readers, adult readers need a toolbox of reading strategies and the knowledge of how and when to use them (Hock & Mellard, 2005). For example, reading strategies applicable to a math course are quite different from those applicable to an English or humanities course. Yet, there are reading comprehension strategies that may prove helpful in both courses.

Students must be able to discern the strategies that work for them in their various college classes (Falk-Ross, 2001). Research has indicated that students who have effective reading strategies will be more successful in learning the material for their courses (Barton, 1997). Therefore, we recognize the importance of effective reading strategies at the college level in light of the lack of professional development for college instructors in relation to reading instruction.

According to Holmes and Doughtery (2006), three types of teacher knowledge contribute to effective classroom practices: content, pedagogy, and pedagogical knowledge. While content knowledge refers to the subject matter itself, pedagogical knowledge refers to the techniques, attitudes, procedures, and elements of cognitive and developmental psychology that impact student learning. In order to effectively teach reading, teachers must learn and master a specialized body of knowledge about the skills, processes, and goals inherent to reading. Comprehension strategies are seldom taught in the university classroom. Yet, these skills are critical to students becoming independent learners. The RAC Faculty Course Revision Project at Fayetteville State University was implemented to meet the needs of its faculty and students.

Reading Across the Curriculum at Fayetteville State University

The Reading Across the Curriculum program at FSU, a Historically Black, regional state University, was a Title III, federally-funded program. The RAC program addressed the university's top priorities to increase retention and graduation rates and to improve academics and co-curricular programs. Demographic data for the underprepared incoming students at the university indicated poor academic performance, low motivation, apparently weak study habits, and lack of essential reading comprehension skills. These students were likely to earn final grades of D or F or to withdraw from classes. Therefore, reading-centered programs of instruction across the curriculum, such as the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project, could have a profoundly positive impact on the academic success of students who would otherwise be at risk of attrition.

The Components of the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project

The RAC Faculty Course Revision Project was designed to enhance teaching and learning capabilities, whereas exposure to selected courses aimed to improve students' academic performance in their discipline areas. The project involved faculty members from various disciplines restructuring a course and making it more centered upon reading comprehension. Courses represented in the program included English Composition I (ENGL 110), English Composition II (ENGL 120), Advanced Composition (ENGL 341), Elementary French II (FREN 120), Principles of Sociology (SOCI 210), Contemporary Social Problems (SOCI 220), and Music Appreciation (MUSI 210).

The RAC Faculty Course Revision Project participants volunteered to participate. Towards the beginning of the semester, faculty members received an email outlining the program's requirements, and faculty members from all disciplines were invited to participate. During the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semesters, seven instructors joined in the project and received a stipend after meeting all program requirements.

The project included the following specific components:

1. **Pre-workshops**: Faculty participants were required to attend three workshops during the first month of the semester. These workshops were designed to familiarize participants with program requirements and introduce various reading comprehension strategies that, with a bit of creativity, might suit every discipline and be implemented in the classroom. At the first workshop, participants received an RAC Faculty Course Revision Project handbook, which consisted of a sample pretest and posttest (see Appendix A) designed to measure students' reading comprehension skills. The tests were accompanied by reading material, which students must consult to gain correct responses. Additionally, the handbook consisted of a sample Reading Across the Curriculum discipline-specific pretest/posttest rubric, a data template form (see Appendix B) that reported students' performance on the tests and a sample Reading Across the Curriculum reading comprehension strategy assignment sheet with rubric/data template form (see Appendix C). Also, faculty participants received two texts, *Mosaic of Thought: The Power of Comprehension Strategy Instruction* by Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman and *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, both of which contained numerous reading comprehension strategies.

2. **RAC Faculty Course Revision Project questionnaire**: During the first week of the semester, faculty participants described the specific course to be redesigned during the semester of participation, the course learning objectives, their perception of students' reading comprehension levels, the manner, if any, in which they have addressed their students' difficulties with reading comprehension in the past and what they hoped to gain from participating in the project.

3. **RAC syllabus with RAC reading clause**: During the first week of the semester, faculty participants were required to submit a course syllabus consisting of the RAC reading clause and the three reading comprehension strategy assignments they planned to implement in the course. The RAC reading clause states: "In conjunction with Fayetteville State University's **Reading Across the Curriculum program**, this course is a reading-centered course geared towards improving students' reading comprehension skills and will thereby incorporate various proven reading strategies in helping to accomplish these learning goals."

4. **Discipline-specific pretest with rubric and data**: All faculty participants were required to create a brief, discipline-specific pretest to be administered to students during the first three weeks of the semester. The pretest was accompanied by a scoring rubric, which measured students' level of reading comprehension, and all data were reported to the RAC Activity Director.

5. **Three reading comprehension strategy assignments:** Faculty participants created at least three assignments that implemented proven reading comprehension strategies during the course of the semester. Examples of assignments came from the texts, *Strategies that Work* and *Mosaic of Thought*, within the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project handbook, as well as the RAC Faculty Blackboard site to which all FSU faculty members were registered. The site was created as a resource to facilitate meaningful reading strategies and as a communication tool among faculty. The reading comprehension strategies allowed instructors to diagnose students' level of reading comprehension before the major assessment within the course and to modify the strategies to fit all disciplines. Also, participants were encouraged to view the strategies not as busy work, but as effective steps for comprehension between assignment of reading material

and assessment. Various reading comprehension strategies were implemented in an intentional and systematic manner with strengthened monitoring of student performance and increased accountability by faculty. Examples of reading comprehension strategies that instructors used were reading and response, reading summary, textual analysis, journal entries, multi-genre response, thinking cap questions, conceptual understanding, interpretation of text quote, "quickwrites," dialogical journaling, and postreading journal.

6. **Discipline-specific posttest with rubric and data:** All faculty participants were required to create a brief, discipline-specific posttest to be administered to students during either the last week of class or the day of the final exam. The posttest could be identical or similar to the pretest. A scoring rubric accompanied the posttest, and all data was reported to the RAC Activity Director.

7. **RAC Faculty Course Revision Project feedback:** Towards the end of the semester, faculty participants submitted written feedback highlighting specific reading strategies used within their courses, the strengths and weaknesses of their instruction, how participation in the project changed their outlooks as instructors, and perceivable changes in their students' reading comprehension skills.

Assessing Students' Academic Growth through the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project

Data Collection

To assess students' academic growth through the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project, the data from students' performance outcomes and faculty feedback were collected and evaluated as a basis for describing the program's effectiveness. Students' reading comprehension skills were measured through pretests and posttests administered at the beginning of the semester and towards the end of the semester. Students' demonstrated skills were assessed on a 0-3 scale. A score of 0 indicated no attempt (grade "F"). A score of 1 indicated "Did Not Meet Expectations," (grade "D"). A score of 2 indicated "Met Expectations" (grade "B" and "C"), and a score of 3 indicated "Exceeded Expectations" (grade "A"). The average points for pretests and posttests were calculated, and the percentage of growth from pretests to posttests for each course was measured.

Results

Data collected with all students in seven courses using the pretests and posttests with rubrics indicated an average gain of 38.8% and a maximum gain of 78.6% between the two tests as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Average Scores and Gains between Pretest and Posttest

Average points	ENGL 110	ENGL 120	ENGL 341	FREN 120	SOCI 210	SOCI 220	MUSI 210
Pretest	1.21	1.12	1.88	1.5	1.13	1.32	2.09
Posttest	2	2	2.42	2.3	1.43	1.32	2.55
Percentage of growth	62.5%	78.6%	28.7%	53.3%	26.5%	0%	22.0%

| Point Value	Ability Level	Explanation of Level
0	Not attempted	Does not address the question
1	Did Not Meet Expectations	Demonstrates some skills
2	Met Expectations	Demonstrates acceptable skills
3	Exceeded Expectations	Demonstrates strong to excellent

Analysis of students' ability levels by percentages is perhaps an accurate way to look at the distribution of students' performance in their content areas. The positive impact of the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project is represented in Table 2. Table 2 shows the increase in the percentage of students from pretest to posttest either meeting or exceeding expectations or the decrease in the percentage of students from pretest to posttest who did not meet expectations. Table 2 displays significant differences between the percentage of students who "Exceeded Expectations" and "Did Not Meet Expectations" for the pretests and posttests.

Figures 1-3 give a graphic representation of the percentages of students in each ability level, clearly demonstrating the significant increase in "Exceeded Expectations" and significant decrease in "Did Not Meet Expectations" as it relates to the pretests and posttests. These data indicate the students' improvement of reading comprehension skills in their courses when given an opportunity to practice and develop their reading comprehension skills in class.

Table 2
*Percentage of Ability Level and Growth between Pretest and Posttest*

| Ability Level		ENGL 110 N=19	ENGL 120 N=11	ENGL 341 N=13	FREN 120 N=10	SOCI 210 N=29	SOCI 220 N=25	MUSI 210 N=11
Exceeded expectations	Pretest	5.3%	0%	6.3%	0%	0%	8%	36.4%
	Posttest	18%	37.5%	60%	40%	26.9%	6.25%	63.6%
Met expectations	Pretest	15.8%	11.8%	75%	46.7%	27.6%	16%	36.4%
	Posttest	82%	25%	40%	50%	46.1%	18.75%	27.3%
Did not meet expectations	Pretest	84.2%	88.2%	18.7%	53.3%	72.4%	76%	27.2%
	Posttest	18%	3.8%	0%	10%	26.9%	75%	9.1%

Figure 1: Exceeded Expectations
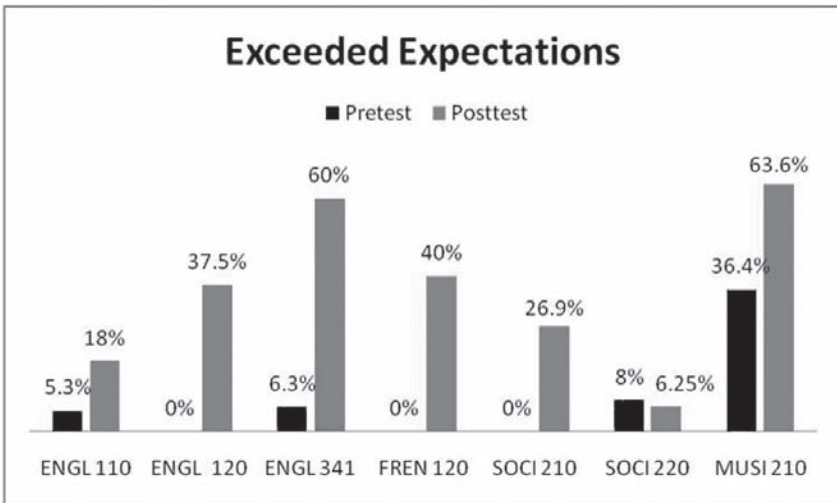
Average percentages of the students who exceeded expectations in pretests and post-tests for each course increased from 8% to 36 %, which indicate 28 % more students exceeded the expectations in the posttests.

Figure 2: Met Expectations
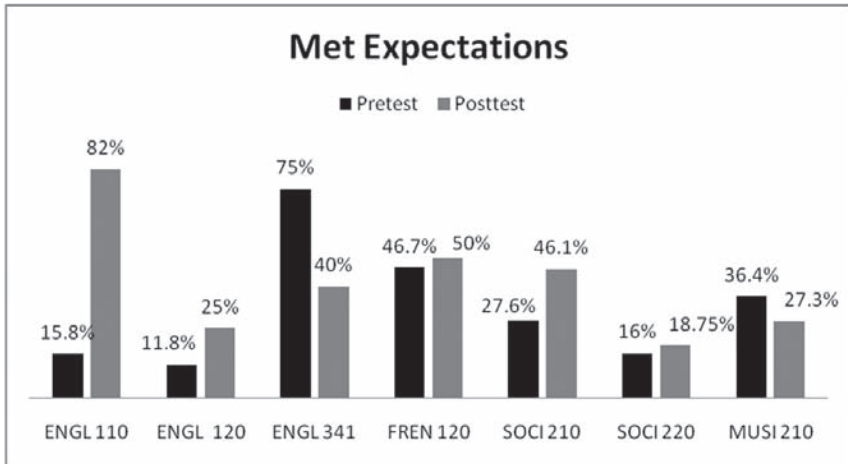
Average percentages of the students who met expectations in pretests and posttests increased from 27% to 40.7 %, which indicate 13.7 % more students met expectations in the posttests.

Figure 3: Did Not Meet Expectations
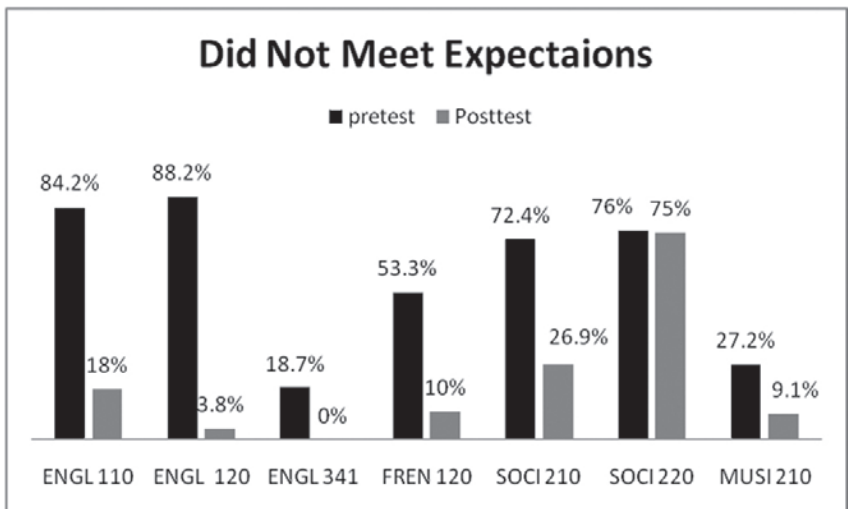
Average percentages of the students who did not meet expectations in pretests and posttests decreased from 60% to 20.4 %, which indicate 39.6% less students did not meet expectations.

Faculty Course Revision Feedback

Toward the end of the semester, RAC Faculty Course Revision Project participants were asked to provide feedback related to their participation in the project. Questions included the following:

1. What reading strategies did you implement in your Reading Across the Curriculum course this semester?
2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of your instruction using the aforementioned strategies?
3. How did participation in the Reading Across the Curriculum Faculty Course Revision Project help you to become a better instructor?
4. What changes did you see in your students' reading habits and/or reading comprehension skills as a result of your participation in the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project?
5. Do you have any other comments/suggestions regarding the project?

Faculty participants employed a wide range of reading comprehension strategies, including multi-genre response, dialogical journaling, contextual concept explanation, "quickwrites," reading summary, and others. Additionally, they chose to implement strategies pedagogically suitable to their courses. For example, one participant wrote, "Since Elementary French is a beginning level course and students have very little knowledge of the language, I implemented mostly Thinking Cap Questions."

Participants cited the strengths of project participation as being afforded the opportunity to make better use of class time in relation to reading assignments, more active engagement by students, an increase in students' ability to think critically in relation to texts, more in-depth discussions of assigned reading materials, use of active reading, and an increase in student motivation. Weaknesses included poor class attendance by students, particularly towards the end of the semester; uncertainty in how to adapt various reading comprehension strategies to the course reading material; pretests/posttests that were too lengthy; and a lack of preparation on the part of the student and instructor.

Faculty participants described the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project as beneficial. One participant remarked, "It slowed the pace of the class and provided a format for more reflective teaching." Another added, "I think I am more sensitive to my students' learning goals and needs overall. Reading is a basic skill, so if students don't read well, they don't succeed in any area." Also, participants credited the project in helping to diversify their teaching methodology and expand their knowledge of

reading comprehension pedagogy.

Faculty noted changes in their students' level of reading proficiency as a result of participating in the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project. One participant wrote, "Comparing the pretest to reading #2 and reading #3, more students were exceeding expectations." Another participant said, "There was a dramatic difference in my students' pretest and posttest results, which showed an increase in students' reading comprehension skills." Also, many participants noticed improvement in students' confidence level when reading and discussing course reading material. One participant described students as "less apprehensive." Yet another participant commented on changes in students' attitude toward reading in general. She said, "Implementing RAC helped my students to realize how important reading is to their overall performance in college. It also brought to them the awareness that there is more than one way to engage a text."

Overall, faculty cited participation in the RAC Faculty Course Revision Project as effective, even highly effective, and students' performance on pretests and posttests showed significant improvement. One participant suggested the project be implemented university wide.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Limitations of the study included a small number of faculty participants who piloted the program and the limited number of faculty participants from disciplines other than Humanities and Social Sciences. To date, the Reading Across the Curriculum model has been adopted by Fayetteville State University as part of its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in preparation for SACS. Future plans include increasing the stipend for faculty participants, expanding the model to include more FSU faculty from various disciplines, as well as revising the model to suit secondary school teachers. Also, this research design did not use statistical analysis to test the hypothesis that reading instruction directly correlates with students' higher performance on the posttest. However, future research may utilize the use of a control group and/or statistical analysis of the results to determine if the improvements between pretest and posttest scores were due to reading instruction or other factors, such as exposure to course content, completion of the course, and maturation.

Conclusion

The RAC Faculty Course Revision Project was successful in helping faculty to apply effective strategies to integrate reading comprehension into their courses. Also, it provided participants a unique opportunity to specially design their courses to improve students' content learning and

thereby refresh their knowledge related to effective reading pedagogy based on the latest academic practices in the field. Participants developed insights into course revision planning and assessment tools as a result of their participation in the project.

Pretest and posttest data showed significant improvement in students' reading comprehension skills. Also, faculty noticed an increase in students' confidence level, as well as an increase in students' enthusiasm for reading. It is plausible that students who participated in an RAC course had higher reading performance as a result of their reading intensive experience.

Empowering faculty members to excel in their roles as educators encouraged and rewarded teaching and promoted students' continual learning. Programs such as the Reading Across the Curriculum Faculty Course Revision Project helped the institution to achieve this goal. The project design and training used was successful and can be easily replicated with the appropriate resources.

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Appendix A

Sample RAC Pretest and Posttest
Advanced Composition (English 341)

Pretest and Posttest

   Read the article titled "When Love Becomes Hurtful" and answer the questions below. Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. According to the article, domestic abuse includes what specific types of abuse?
2. Which of the following words is a synonym for the article's use of the word batter?
   a a slope
   b. to hit heavily and repeatedly
   c. a thick, beaten liquid mixture
3. Is the author's purpose in writing this article to inform, persuade or both? Use details and examples from the story to support your answer.
4. According to the article, under what condition can you obtain a protective order against someone?
5. What does the article suggest as an effective way of addressing the problem of domestic violence within the community? Give suggestions as to what else might be done to address the problem?

Appendix B

Sample Reading Across the Curriculum Discipline-Specific Pretest/Posttest Rubric/Data Template

The discipline-specific pretest should be administered during the first week of classes and, for the sake of uniformity, must consist of **either five or ten questions**. For assessments consisting of **five questions**, each question accounts for **20 pts. each**; for those consisting of **ten questions**, each question accounts for **10 points each**. The purpose of the test is to assess students' reading comprehension at the beginning of the course. The exact test or one similar in format (the posttest) should be administered during either the final week of class or the final exam period.

Also, please note that a reading sample of some type (excerpt from book, book chapter, article, etc.) that correlates to the course must accompany the test, and students SHOULD NOT be able to answer questions without consulting the reading.

• This completed rubric/data template must accompany a copy of your actual assessment and reading sample; all materials must be submitted.

Simple Pretest/Posttest Rubric
90-100 (A) — exceeds expectations
89-70 (B/C) — meets expectations
Below 70 — does not meet expectations

Student's initials	**Student's score**
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Data
_____% of students exceeded expectations
_____% of students met expectations
_____% of students did not meet expectations

Appendix C

Sample Reading Across the Curriculum Reading Comprehension Strategy Assignment Sheet With Rubric/Data Template

Reading Comprehension Strategy Assignment: "Crossing the Border without Losing Your Past" by Oscar Casares

In-class Reading Strategy: Thinking Cap Questions

Instructions: Please respond to each of the thinking cap questions in relation to "Crossing the Border without Losing Your Past" by Oscar Casares. Remember, **white cap** questions refer to information available within the text. **Red cap** questions refer to intuition and feelings. **Gray cap** questions refer to cautions/problems/ negativities within the text. **Yellow cap** questions refer to benefits or positives. **Green cap** questions refer to alternative or creative ideas, and **blue cap** questions are metacognitive questions that ask you to summarize the story or relate it to outside concepts or ideas.

Your responses should consist of at least three complete sentences and be accompanied by page numbers in the text that support your answer.

White Cap Questions
- When is Mexican Independence day?
- What are "Charro Days," and what does the celebration commemorate?
- Why is it important for the author and his family to celebrate this holiday?
- What else would you like to know or need to know about the writer to gain a clearer understanding of his dilemma?

Red Cap Questions
- How do the writer and his family feel about their Mexican heritage?
- How does the writer feel when his schoolmate at the university seeks to define him as "Mexican American?"

Gray Cap Questions
- What are the difficulties the writer faces in life as a result of his dual heritage/ identity?
- Why does the writer have a problem with being labeled "Hispanic?"
- What negative stereotypes does he cite as being associated with Mexican culture?

Yellow Cap Questions
- What does the writer identify as the positive characteristics of his upbringing and family's heritage? Name and discuss at least three.

Green Cap Questions
- What might the writer do to overcome the complexities of identifying with both his American and Mexican heritage?
- How might the writer have responded to the student at the University of Texas who made him feel confused about his ethnicity?

Blue Cap Questions
- What positive insight does the writer gain at the end of the narrative?
- What are the possible negative consequences of stereotyping others?
- What do you know and how do you feel about the infiltration of Mexican immigrants in the United States?

Reading Comprehension Strategy Assignment Sheet
Rubric /Data Template

Colleagues, during the course of the semester, you must assign at least three proven reading comprehension strategy assignments to your students. Sample strategies are within your RAC Handbook, the RAC Faculty Blackboard site, and the texts, *Mosaic of Thought* and *Strategies that Work*. Choose strategies that best suit your discipline and method of teaching.

This completed rubric/data template must accompany a copy of your reading comprehension strategy assignment sheet (See example in RAC Handbook); all materials must be submitted.

Reading Comprehension Strategy Assignment Rubric

90-100 (A) — Exceeds Expectations
1. Links background knowledge and examples from the text to enhance comprehension or interpretation.
2. Asks and answers different kinds of questions and finds evidence in the text to support questions and answers.
3. Independently makes predictions, interpretations and/or draws conclusions; clearly explains connections using evidence from the text and personal knowledge ideas, or beliefs.

89-70 (B/C) — Meets Expectations
1. Relates background knowledge/experience to text.
2. Can ask and answer questions and begin to provide evidence from the text.

3. Makes predictions, interpretations, and/or draws conclusions and justifies response with information from the text; however, some prompting may be necessary.

Below 70 — Does Not Meet Expectations
1. Does not make connections to the text
2. Unable to ask or answer questions; gives inappropriate or off-topic responses.
3. Does not make predictions, interpretations, or draw conclusions

	Student's initials	**Student's score**
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Data
_____% of students exceeded expectations
_____% of students met expectations
_____% of students did not meet expectations