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Article

Inside the Hidden Curriculum: "How-To" Practices for Supporting Underprepared Student Writers in the First-Year Writing Classroom

Kristen Starkowski
Harvard College

Abstract

First-year writing pedagogies prioritize encouraging students to forge an academic identity by conceptualizing and intervening in scholarly conversations. Student writers from institutionally underprepared backgrounds often find this process both limiting and empowering because specific practices associated with classroom expectations and the university experience remain unfamiliar to them. In this article, I reveal a need for "how-to" exercises within the first-year writing classroom that aim to dismantle the hidden curriculum—a term that denotes the resources, norms, and values that are inaccessible to students who have not received guidance on these aspects of university academics. These interventions, which range from instruction on modes of classroom participation to methods of preparing for office hours, already complement the standard first-year writing curriculum and promise to promote success among underprepared students by rendering possibilities for class engagement explicit.

Introduction

Over three decades have passed since David Bartholomae (1986) first described the pressures student writers confront as they attempt to "invent the university" and assemble a toolkit to express themselves within the boundaries of conventional academic discourse (p. 4). While "inventing the university" through written work can be empowering for students, most of whom have not been invited to unpack arguments or weigh in on a pressing debate before university, it can also become a

source of anxiety for students from institutionally underprepared backgrounds. Asking students to create space for their voices within scholarly conversations therefore necessarily involves demystifying a hidden curriculum, one that is often especially unclear to underprepared students, or, as Rachel Gable (2021) describes in *The Hidden Curriculum*, "those for whom the educational context in question initially seems unfamiliar, surprising, or strange" (p. x). Throughout this article, I use the term "hidden curriculum" to refer to the implicit or unwritten assumptions and expectations that shape the university learning experience, which become especially salient within the first-year writing classroom, as first-year writing is often a core requirement across U.S. universities. I take seriously the promise of Bartholomae's call to "invent the university" by reflecting on strategies that I have used to introduce underprepared students to the complexity of academic speech and writing, while also encouraging them to forge a scholarly identity in the process.

Higher education professionals often use the term "hidden curriculum" to refer to the resources and support services, behaviors and practices, and acronyms and other academic terminology that remain inaccessible to students who have not received guidance or instruction on these aspects of university academics. In "Developing Educational Programs: Overcoming the Hidden Curriculum," Henry A. Giroux (1978) defines the "hidden curriculum" as the "norms and values usually not talked about in teachers' statements of objectives or goals, even though such norms and values are implicitly and effectively taught in their classrooms" (p. 148). Every educational setting has its own hidden curriculum. Individual colleges and universities have institutional hidden curricula, departments have hidden curricula, and instructors have pedagogical hidden curricula. These curricula doubly disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged by race, class, ethnicity, or educational background.

In this article, I think deliberately about the ways that first-year writing instructors can develop teaching methods to confront aspects of the hidden curriculum that emerge to a heightened degree in our classrooms. For example, in the writing classroom, instructors may design activities and assignments with the expectation that students know how to unpack a prompt, how to analyze a scholarly source, and how to synthesize the ideas of two scholars in an essay. Similarly, instructors may expect that students know how to reach their campus dean for an extension approval request or when to book an appointment at the Writing Center. However, not all students are equally familiar or comfortable with institutional practices and norms, and transparency surrounding these aspects of the curriculum can help students who may not think to ask questions on these topics or who may feel "silly" for doing so.

"How-to" interventions that communicate informal arenas of university knowledge can respond to the hidden curriculum and encourage success among institutionally underprepared student writers both in and beyond the first-year writing classroom. By normalizing the asking of questions, promoting strong student and faculty relationships through one-on-one conferences, and clarifying unit expectations, instructors can help academically underprepared writers become more comfortable wrestling with difficult questions that invite them to shape academic discourse. These activities share a commitment to helping already impressive thinkers translate their ideas to the page by demystifying university-level writing. In combination with revision and other common scaffolding practices, these interventions make transparent the language and behaviors implicit in the hidden curriculum in ways that assume multiple identities and encourage multiple voices, which can translate to a stronger and more authentic sense of academic belonging.

It is important to note that different institutional environments may require the transmission of different how-to interventions. Adjusting the social relations of the classroom in order to embed how-to practices into pedagogical practices can be a first step toward demystifying academic discourse by translating taken-for-granted knowledge and resources to specific institutional and classroom contexts without marking any student as "remedial" or "basic." As students work to develop new writing strategies, it is important that they not find themselves in a subordinate role, but rather are invited to ask questions and to work through ideas with both the instructor and their peers. These modes of collective inquiry and transparency, which include how-to practices, allow underprepared undergraduate writers to move beyond mimicking academic conventions and to see themselves as members of a scholarly community with a distinct point of view. In the sections of this article that follow, I will share how-to practices that I have found effective in first-year writing classes across a variety of pedagogical contexts.

How to "Seminar" or How to Engage in Class Discussion

Studies of first-generation undergraduates at various universities highlight the fact that students crave clear directions surrounding the conventions of both academic writing and university operations at large. Rachel Gable's (2021) recent study of first-generation undergraduates at legacy universities quotes one student who cites the obscure language of academia as one of the primary struggles of his university experience: "Participation…is a huge hurdle. I struggled to keep up and to say even one sentence in my sections. I felt there was a language I needed to learn in order to properly express any idea I had" (p. 70). These are anxieties that many students face, regardless of background.

Even though students may not always be proactive in directly approaching instructors with the questions that are on their minds, they are eager to learn what is expected of them. Gable's (2021) study, for instance, cites a student who desperately wanted to improve, but did not know how to go about bettering his or her academic performance: "I was very lost and didn't know what to do with myself…And then I read this book about how to get A's in college. I found it surfing the internet. I literally Googled how to do better in college" (p. 78). The student's instinct to "Google" his or her way to success reflects what several previous studies in the field of educational psychology have confirmed about help-seeking behaviors among university students. In "The Complexity of Cultural Mismatch in Higher Education," Janet Chang and Shu-wen Wang (2020) found that "racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students tend[ed] to rely on themselves and underutilize social support because they have concerns about …burdening others and making matters worse" (p. 280), a finding that echoes anxieties many students experience about troubling others by asking questions. In a similar vein, Karabenick & Knapp (1988) found that the likelihood of students using campus resources and seeking help diminishes when students are at risk of poor academic outcomes, such as failing, and that some students fear the stigma of continuing to perform poorly after seeking help (p. 406). While instructor openness and availability can go a long way in promoting help-seeking behaviors among underprepared students, in this article, I suggest that assignments that encourage help-seeking behaviors and weave different forms of engagement into the classroom curriculum can help to translate the unspoken rules of academic participation.

A cornerstone of my writing pedagogy for several years has involved teaching Mark Gaipa's (2004) cartoon drawings in "Breaking in the Conversation," not only as a means of rendering explicit the variety of ways that students can claim authority in their academic writing, but also as a method of making forms of classroom participation more transparent. For example, in a writing assignment, "piggybacking" involves borrowing an idea from a scholarly source in order to extend that concept by applying it to a new context; offering a new example or adding onto what a previous student said by engaging a different assigned source can also be a very effective strategy for contributing to classroom discussion (Gaipa, 2004, p. 428). Similarly, in scholarly writing, "playing peacemaker" involves proposing an argument that resolves a debate between scholars, but students who play the role of "summarizer" in class conversations model this same intellectual move (Gaipa, 2004, p. 430). The class "summarizer," in effect, reiterates what two or more previous classmates shared before articulating a connecting thread between these previous points. Gaipa's ballroom metaphor, which compares modes of criticism to forms of conversation that might emerge among scholars discussing

a topic in a hotel ballroom, helps me demystify conventions surrounding class discussions, which are a major source of anxiety for many institutionally underprepared students. I know of several colleagues who incorporate similar activities into their classrooms, making classroom discussion "moves" explicit and allowing students to try out different approaches to participation early on in the term.

As part of the same lesson, which I position early in the semester, I have found it effective to distribute a handout or share a PowerPoint slide that clearly articulates a range of potential ways of participating in class discussions, so that the language surrounding this form of discourse does not alienate students who are new to seminar or workshop-style learning environments. When debriefing the activity at the end of class, several students reported feeling both surprised and empowered by our discussion about participation: few entered class that day imagining asking a question or synthesizing the ideas of other classmates as valued forms of participation. For reference, here is the handout that I circulate:

Adding an example or bringing in new evidence:

____, you mentioned the following example from our reading. In one of our other class sources, the author writes XYZ, which relates to what you brought up in that…

___, I really like the point you made earlier about X. I wonder, what do you think about that idea in light of [a specific piece of evidence]?

___, what you just mentioned actually reminds me a lot of what we were talking about last class, regarding XYZ.

Pointing out a Difference:

I see what you are saying, but I have actually been thinking about the topic in a different way. Let me share how I understand the topic.

Highlighting a Similarity:

I had a similar idea to ____, except I also want to emphasize _____.

Building off of what _____ said, I want to bring the class to a related line of the text, which is important because…

Posing a Question:

That's such an interesting idea, _____. Can you expand on that a bit? I wasn't quite sure what you had in mind.

Synthesizing Ideas:

___ brought up point X, and ___ mentioned point Y, and it struck me that both X and Y can be connected by thinking about Z.

How to Prepare for Conferences and Office Hours

First-year writing courses, in many respects, can double as "how to do university" courses, and one way they can do this is by providing instructions surrounding under-discussed aspects of the university experience, such as preparing for office hours and student conferences. Over the several years that I have taught Expository Writing, it has become clear to me that most students have never been invited to attend office hours or writing conferences in high school. These kinds of one-on-one student/faculty interactions prove daunting to many students, who often assume that attending office hours and seeking support is an activity that only those who are struggling with course material should do. For example, in "(No) Harm in Asking," Anthony Abraham Jack (2016) interviewed 89 undergraduates at an elite university and found that while middle-class undergraduates and the "privileged poor," those who attended boarding, day, or preparatory high schools, were conformable approaching authority figures, students from underprepared backgrounds withdrew from authority figures and were largely uncomfortable asking questions to instructors in these environments (p. 1). Gable's study lends further insight into this phenomenon and into why institutionally underprepared students retreat from spaces like office hours. Gable cites a student named Erik, who found it unclear exactly which kinds of questions count as office-hour-worthy questions. According to Gable (2021), "it seemed to him that he was expected to know the linguistic codes of a ritual performance when it came to the practice of office hours, and that his classmates were already well versed in the ritual, its expectations, and cadences, whereas Erik had no idea how to even begin to try" (p. 83). Because many students enter university from institutional environments that frame asking for help as a negative marker of vulnerability and weakness, I actively de-stigmatize the use of office hours and related resources–such as the Writing Center, or booking an appointment with a campus dean or staff member at an academic resource center–so that students come to recognize that taking advantage of these services is a routine aspect of any dedicated student's approach toward their workload.

Like many of my fellow instructors, I strive to model the kinds of questions and conversations that students and I may have in office hours or in draft conferences, so that office hours and conferences become a comfortable space for intellectual growth and exploration. With this aim, I distribute a handout on the topic or post the following page on our class website during the second week of the

semester. I then hold introductory one-on-one conferences with students on an initial, low stakes writing assignment:

> As you reflect on the course syllabus and what we have learned this week, take a moment to think about the following questions, which may become material for your conversation with me.
>
> 1. How do you understand yourself as a writer, and what are some goals that you have for yourself this semester?
> 2. Describe your previous experiences with academic writing. What did you discover from these experiences?
> 3. How did you select a topic for this writing assignment? Are there other details or parts of the text that intrigue you?
> 4. What new thoughts have come to mind since you first drafted this? How have our classroom discussions shaped your thinking?
> 5. What was most difficult for you when you wrote this draft? Are there any challenging elements of the writing process that you'd like advice on?
>
> In addition to this specific information, which is helpful for clarifying the types of questions students might want to bring to office hours, I also make sure to present several scenarios as I introduce this topic in class. Office hours, I explain, are not just for asking a specific question, but can be a means of seeking additional feedback on an assignment, clarifying a comment from seminar or from marginal notes on a paper, discussing university or career goals, or sharing personal circumstances that affect the learning experience. These straightforward discussions of not only how to ask questions, but also of the purpose of the questions themselves, can go a long way in making office hours and conferences more inviting to students hesitant to attend. Office hours and one-on-one conference encounters are also of particular importance for underprepared students because these students may discover that they are actually more comfortable voicing questions and concerns in a space separate from peers and other students.

How to Hone Active Reading Skills

In a first-year writing classroom, instructors cannot assume that students have been trained to actively read sources, especially following over a year of remote learning, where course textbooks were digitized and the software necessary for actively marking up a page was not always widely accessible. Towards the beginning of every composition class that I teach, at about the moment when we are ready to dive into and discuss our first substantial reading or scholarly source, I ask students

to share reading strategies that have worked for them in the past, before presenting students with a menu of options that may work for them as they grapple with complex sources throughout university. The active reading strategies that I circulate include:

1. Circling and defining important key terms.
2. Underlining the main idea or argument of the reading in the introduction, but also later in the source or in the conclusion, as the reasoning behind the thesis at the onset of the source may not have been made explicit before the essay unfolded.
3. Keep a list of questions that the essay sparked, and have these questions ready for class discussion.
4. Understand the purpose of each paragraph of the source, and write a keyword next to each paragraph to remind yourself of that purpose later on.
5. Bracket 2-3 sentences or passages that stood out to you for a specific reason, and be prepared to share why you bracketed these parts of the text.
6. Reverse outline the source to better understand how it structures its key points and builds its argument, or create a concept map of the author's argument after reading it to tease out connections between the author's ideas.

When introducing these strategies to students, I make it clear that these aren't the only ways of active reading, but that they are strategies that have worked well for other students in the past as they adjust to longer and more complex reading loads. I also explain that the kind of reading that they may be asked to do in university often differs from high school, where students read a chapter or two of a novel at a time or focus on a short textbook section per week. In high school, many teachers emphasize summary over analysis, so many students may find the expectation to attend closely to specific paragraphs, lines, or words daunting at first, and encouraging them to develop active reading strategies earlier on in their university experience facilitates the transition from summary to analysis and argument.

How to Close Read and Unpack a Prompt

One of my favorite texts to teach in any university composition class is an excerpt from the beginning of Jennine Capó Crucet's *My Time Among the Whites: Notes from an Unfinished Education* (2019), where Crucet, who is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, writes about her experiences as a first-generation student at Cornell University. I taught this excerpt for several summers as part of a critical reading and writing enrichment course for first-generation and

low-income incoming freshmen. During this unit of the curriculum, I asked my students to list key terms and language that Crucet finds unfamiliar and alienating when she begins university. The students identify examples as varied as knowledge of the need to bring a shower caddy because of the dorm's communal bathrooms to the language of a first assignment prompt, which "had the word intersectionalities in it" (Crucet, 2019, p. 15). Whether I am teaching this excerpt over the summer to students who are about to matriculate or during the academic year to freshmen, I always ask students to share any unfamiliar language that they have encountered, which encourages them to connect their own experiences to Crucet's and normalizes asking questions about academic discourse and the university system. We spend some time during that lesson focusing on the language of Crucet's assignment prompt, as it provides a smooth transition into discussing strategies that students can use when they encounter new terms related to academics or class privilege in their own assignments or learning environments.

Not unlike many first-year writing instructors, I am careful to help students unpack assignments and essay prompts as I distribute them; I believe that the first-year composition classroom can provide a productive space for helping students develop strategies for deciphering complex prompts. We discuss the structure of a typical essay prompt–the context for the assignment, the essay task, and the technical instructions–before reflecting on the importance of the verbs that the prompt uses. Is the prompt asking the student to offer a critique or to compare and contrast? Is the prompt asking the student to describe a phenomenon, evaluate a concept, or both? Is the prompt asking the student to define, apply, and illustrate an idea, or review competing opinions on a selected topic? Once the students dissect the prompt, we collectively brainstorm an example of each aspect of the prompt, so that students know how to approach the question when they begin the drafting process.

How to Formulate a Research Question and Thesis Statement

In the composition classroom, confusion related to the hidden curriculum arises in office hours, class discussions, and the other contexts I have mentioned above, but it surfaces most prominently during research-driven units, where students collect, synthesize, and engage sources in order to form an original argument. Not unlike Erik, the student in Gable's study who found it difficult to pinpoint the kinds of questions that are worthy to bring to office hours, most students in the first-year writing classroom will have limited experience forming a research question and generating an argument in response to it. For this reason, research-based writing assignments are, for a large percentage of students, a first attempt at locating and putting multiple sources on a topic of their own choosing into

conversation.

How exactly, then, can instructors guide students toward forming a research question of an appropriate scope–not too narrow, but not too broad either? In order to address this common difficulty, it can be helpful to provide students with templates—with the caveat that they may very well be adjusting the exact wording of the question as their thinking develops. It is common practice at many institutions to emphasize that the most generative research questions arise from a clash or tension between two details, whether those details emerge from within the same text or from the application of one source to another. Possible templates for encouraging students to get started with this kind of thinking include "Why, despite X, do we see Y?" or "Although scholars widely agree that X, why does [insert a specific detail] suggest Y?" Similarly, circulating a thesis statement template based on a version of Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* or Erik Simpson's *Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis*, offers students opportunities to imitate modes of persuasion as they develop an argument and style appropriate to the topic, text, audience, and purpose of an assignment. A template of this nature may resemble the following: Upon examining X, we see Y, which many readers do not notice; Y is important because of Z. (Simpson, n.d., p. 4).

Teaching to the Hidden Curriculum

How-to interventions can help to bridge the divide between the formal curriculum of the university, the written requirements and policies that guide student engagement and evaluation, and the hidden curriculum, or the informal and unwritten expectations that influence a student's success in the classroom and in the formal curriculum. Most colleges and universities operate based on white middle or upper-class value systems, meaning that students who have not been exposed to certain knowledge or academic behaviors find themselves unintentionally penalized for this lack of knowledge.

Universities are already starting to recognize the significance of teaching to the hidden curriculum. Georgetown University, for example, began offering a pass-fail seminar, called "Mastering the Hidden Curriculum," for first-year undergraduates who identify as first-generation or low-income in 2018. The fall 2021 syllabus included readings, videos, discussions, and projects on topics as varied as overcoming imposter syndrome to developing an individualized "resilience plan." Similarly, Princeton University's Emma Bloomberg Center for Access and Opportunity has emerged as a model for several universities' immersion programs through its Freshman Scholars Institute, a six-week summer program focused as much on dismantling the hidden curriculum as on reading and

writing skills. The program spotlights campus resources, offering opportunities for students to connect with mentors such as the Director of the Writing Center during their first week on campus, and covers skillsets as varied as how to watch a film with a critical eye to what it means to arrive prepared for seminar. Other universities offer similar summer bridge programs, including First-Year Scholars at Yale, RU-1st at Rutgers, and The Successful Transition and Academic Readiness (STAR) Program at Northern Arizona University. Most of these programs offer opportunities for students to earn credits over the summer before stepping onto campus for the first time, but they also integrate advising, programming, and mentorship initiatives into the curriculum so that students are exposed to and become comfortable using the resources available to them early on in their undergraduate careers.

It is important to note that hidden curricula often presuppose an implicit model of a successful student, which measures student achievement according to the extent to which a student adopts specific behaviors and values a certain kind of academic identity. For many underprepared students, adjusting to and excelling in a new academic environment may require behaving in ways that conflict with the cultural scripts internal to a student's identity. In *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* (2019), for example, Jennifer Morton describes why classroom participation felt particularly difficult for one of her students, an immigrant from South Asia: "A few weeks into the semester, he came into office hours to try to convince me that he didn't need to talk in class…he had been taught to listen to the professor's ideas, not assert his own…Raja's eventual willingness to speak up can…be seen as a story of acculturation—an immigrant kid being forced to reinvent himself to fit into the culture that dominates American educational institutions and middle-class workplaces" (p. 103). Yet, in order to meet the expectations surrounding participation and engagement in his first-year writing classroom, Raja needed to become more vocal and interact with teachers and peers in ways that at times felt at odds with understandings of success in his home community. There is no single way to guide students toward success in a specific institutional context, while also valuing the student for who they are, but instructors can strive to make explicit other forms of engagement that do not necessarily involve speaking up, such as adding a related resource to a Google document, Tweeting reactions to class material before or after class, or journaling to reflect on key takeaways from a class discussion.

Last summer, while I was teaching first-generation and low-income freshmen in a critical reading and writing immersion program, a student of mine from a traditional Chinese family shared similar remarks. After I asked students to apply a theoretical concept from class to their own lives, she chose W.E.B. DuBois's concept of "double consciousness" in order to highlight how warring parts of her

identity surfaced in the classroom. She shared that her community considers not holding eye contact as a form of respect, whereas American educational systems and workplaces value the opposite. She also wrote that her community praises group success, not individual success, and that she was taught to solve problems on her own before "troubling others" and reaching out for help.

As the following accounts suggest, students often come to the classroom with very different values or assumptions about the university experience and demystifying the hidden curriculum through how-to interventions requires mindfulness of the extent to which the information that we circulate and exchange promotes particular approaches to schoolwork or some forms of academic identity over others.

With any mentoring program or how-to intervention designed to decode the hidden curriculum, it is important that students understand that the end goal is not assimilation. As they render the expectations of higher education more transparent, instructors should not be trying to mold students into thinking and writing according to a one-size-fits-all model, but rather should aim to present a range of possibilities for effective engagement with course material. The pedagogical interventions that I have proposed here render explicit multiple ways of approaching curricula and classroom dynamics, exposing students to the conventions of university academics, while also allowing them to adopt an approach that feels honest to their identity. Most importantly, as I am suggesting here, forms of support can be embedded within larger programs designed to guide students through the hidden curriculum early in their university experiences.

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