



Kristi Barker, M.Ed.

Instructor of Developmental Reading — South Plains College

Aplia™ Helps Developmental Readers Build Vital Skills and Improve Outcomes

Kristi Barker has been teaching at South Plains College (SPC) in Lubbock, Texas, for 10 years. The community college serves more than 10,000 learners and prides itself on providing a student-centered learning environment, a concept that's right up Kristi's alley. A developmental reading instructor for six years, she uses the Aplia™ online homework tool to provide her students with reading practice and constructive feedback outside of the classroom. "Aplia was a godsend," she says.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Kristi teaches four face-to-face sections of developmental reading each term. Class sizes are limited to 15-20 students. Classes include traditional learners as well as non-traditional students, some of whom are young and already parents, and others who are older and have returned after a long absence in efforts to better their lives. Many students work at least part-time; others more than full-time. Some receive little encouragement at home about attending school and may have had negative prior experiences with learning.

THE CHALLENGES

It's fortunate that Kristi is an enthusiastic teacher, because many of her students, required to take the course due to poor placement exam scores, are less than thrilled. Kristi sees her biggest challenge as encouraging students to be open-minded to learning. "Most of these students are in developmental reading because they have to be, not because they want to be. Academically, some have been sent negative messages indicating that they're never going to amount to anything. Their mindset is not conducive to learning," she says.

Engagement is also challenging because many students are distracted by pressing life issues. "Some of my students don't know if they'll be able to pay the rent," she says. "I try to build their confidence, and tell them they were born with an endless capacity to learn. I believe that any student who spends time in the right environment can learn, and I want to create that environment." Kristi views her role as being that of part instructor, part life coach. Why? "As Maslow would say, 'You can't learn until you feel comfortable.'"

Kristi's students are anything but comfortable — academically as well as financially and socially. They struggle with interpreting the text that they encounter in their college textbooks. "Poor vocabulary slows their comprehension, and when they don't understand they get discouraged, which further impedes learning," she says. "So in addition to encouragement, they need practice and individual attention."

THE RESULTS

Kristi immediately felt at ease with Aplia. "It was relevant, and I could tell that my students would feel comfortable with its interface. Beyond that, I saw how it targeted learning levels with text-specific questions that are tied to Bloom's Taxonomy," she says. "The questions are designed more thoughtfully and intelligently than those in competing products."

CHALLENGES

- **Students required to take developmental reading are unmotivated** due to discouraging past learning experiences, lack of confidence, and pressing life challenges.
- **Reading students need plentiful practice** and individualized attention outside of class to help them build skills.
- **Manual grading of homework taxes instructors' busy schedules** and prevents students from receiving feedback in a timely manner.

SOLUTIONS

- Aplia
- Carter, Christine Evans, *Mindscapes: Critical Reading Skills and Strategies*
- Dole, Ivan & Leslie Taggart, *Connect: College Reading*

RESULTS

- **Aplia engages students** with varied interactive exercises that hold them accountable for their work. Instructors' option to offer multiple assignment attempts motivates practice by offering students a chance to improve their grade.
- **Assignments include immediate and constructive feedback**, reinforcing key concepts and helping students improve their reading and comprehension skills. Exercises support the text in use by employing the same terminology, style, and pedagogy.
- **Aplia saves instructors time** by automatically recording grades in the gradebook, and with reporting tools that allow instructors to monitor individual and class progress. Course management tools help instructors work more efficiently.

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Students’ practice occurs in the way in which Aplia was designed, with weekly assignments that correspond to the book chapter covered in class. “Students come to class better prepared because they do the Aplia assignment before lecture. As a result, they’re familiar with the topic when I lecture on it, and they retain more.” She allows three attempts at each exercise, and sets the Aplia gradebook to keep a student’s highest grade. After class, students can repeat the exercises to potentially improve their grade, thereby motivating additional practice that reinforces their learning.

“What I like best about Aplia is the opportunity for students to get instant, individual feedback while they practice. I can’t provide that level of attention. Aplia tells them how they did and offers helpful hints, even for correct answers. Even if they guess, they receive information that might sink in.” She adds, “When I graded the homework, it took three days before students got feedback — that’s so archaic.”

Instant feedback is important in developmental reading. “When we’re learning new skills, we have to know whether the technique we’re practicing is correct. If students work through a set of assignments and are doing something wrong, then the entire exercise is a waste. If they can practice, get feedback, and then adjust, they will practice and learn more effectively.”

Although Kristi says her students don’t “love” Aplia (just as they don’t love anything she assigns), they acknowledge that it provides good practice for them. Furthermore, some students are clearly more engaged. “Aplia captures their attention. I have a handful of students who come to class and want to discuss an article or video that they saw in Aplia, and that’s a good sign,” she says. “Because of Aplia, my students are exposed to more practice and better practice, and in a more individualized way.”

Aplia serves as Kristi’s course management system, with a gradebook that offers tools to monitor student and class performance. “I use Aplia for announcements, attendance, assignments, course materials, grades, everything,” she says. “The program is easy to use, another advantage compared to other systems. I have a student who doesn’t know how to send email, but she can use Aplia.”

Says Kristi, “Aplia allows me to spend class time having group interactions that are as important to students’ learning as individual practice. If I had to use class time for rote practice, I wouldn’t have time to facilitate these other valuable experiences.”

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