

# Implementing the Learner Journey Framework in a Foundational Writing Course: A Case Study in Scaffolded Design, AI Support, and Faculty Delivery

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## Abstract

High withdrawal and failure rates in foundational courses are well-documented and closely linked to long-term persistence and degree completion outcomes. This case study aims to assess whether the Learner Journey Framework, a comprehensive, theory-aligned approach to instructional design, can enhance persistence and success in a high-stakes, foundational course (Reading and Writing Strategies) at an associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degree-granting institution based in the Upper Midwest, which offers campus-based and online degree programs which was associated with high withdrawal and failure rates due to its focus on lower-level cognitive tasks, with most objectives falling at Level 2 (Understanding) on Bloom's Taxonomy and minimal engagement at Level 3 (Applying). The accelerated six-week redesign timeline was guided by the conceptual foundation of the Learner Journey Framework, which integrates scaffolded learning, cognitive development, and backward design using Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure that students progressed from basics (understanding) to deeper thinking (evaluating and synthesizing information). AI tools assisted in both curriculum design and supporting students in brainstorming and outlining their process papers. The custom tool was configured to prevent direct answers and instead guide students through reflective questioning. Several challenges emerged during the early stages of instructional redesign, including concerns about the appropriateness of these elevated expectations for students at this level and the instructional design team's preference for primarily text-based delivery, which did not align with the intended multimodal design. These issues were addressed through clear pedagogical scaffolding where the learner's journey progressed incrementally through cognitive stages, building readiness and confidence and the involvement of a media contractor to produce video-based learning support for each module. The course was finalized and launched in the learning management system seven weeks after the redesign efforts began. The implementation of the revised curriculum by engaged faculty demonstrated an improved paper submission rate, rising from 63.3% over the four terms prior to full implementation to 77.8% during the implementation term, while the failure rate decreased from 34% to 21.4%. Additionally, students engaged more frequently in higher-order tasks, including APA formatting, integrating sources, and critical evaluation. Together, these shifts reflect how various interdependent factors, such as faculty, design, and support, must align to ensure a sustained student journey, allowing them to stay in the course longer, complete more tasks, and engage with more challenging tasks without falling off.

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## 1. Introduction

Student retention is a significant issue in foundational writing courses, especially among nontraditional and underprepared students. High withdrawal and failure rates in these gateway courses are well-documented and closely linked to long-term persistence and degree completion outcomes (Mittra & Zhang, 2021; Swan *et al.*, 2019). These challenges are often exacerbated in online environments, where engagement and faculty presence may be uneven, further contributing to academic disconnection (Coleman *et al.*, 2021). In response to these persistent challenges, I led a redesign of a foundational course at associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degree-granting institution based in the Upper Midwest, which offers campus-based and online degree programs. This course had been associated with high rates of withdrawal and failure. The course served as an ideal pilot site for applying the Learner Journey Framework (Robinson, 2025), a model I developed to move beyond isolated interventions and offer a comprehensive, theory-aligned approach to instructional design, learner scaffolding, and academic persistence.

While the Learner Journey Framework addresses pedagogical and institutional imperatives through structured cognitive scaffolding, its claims have yet to be empirically tested. This gap between theoretical validity and real-world application underscores the importance of this case study: to determine whether a framework grounded in learning theory can enhance persistence and success in a high-stakes, foundational course. The strategic revision of the foundational writing course reflects the institution's broader mission to support equitable student success and financial sustainability by improving the quality and coherence of foundational education.

### *1.1 Purpose of the Study*

This case study examines whether the Learner Journey Framework, grounded in widely accepted educational theory, achieves the intended outcomes when applied in a real-world course setting. While its conceptual foundation integrates scaffolded learning, cognitive development, and backward design (Robinson, 2025), its practical effect on student persistence and academic success remains untested. This study takes that next step, examining implementation in a foundational writing course where institutional efforts have not yet significantly shifted persistence metrics. The inquiry is both scholarly and practical: as the developer of the framework, I aim to determine whether the model can bridge the gap between intention and outcome in an applied context.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

Three questions guided this research: First, how does the Learner Journey Framework influence instructional design in foundational writing? Second, what effects, if any, does its implementation have on student persistence and academic success? Finally, what challenges emerge in aligning institutional practices with the framework?

### *1.3 Institutional Context*

Foundational courses, such as Reading and Writing Strategies, continued to exhibit persistent equity gaps and academic setbacks, indicating that course-level changes needed to be more than cosmetic. While institutional leadership highlighted student persistence and readiness as priorities, traditional retention efforts had yielded limited returns. The course's revision occurred during an institutional milestone, a timely moment for the institution to reflect on its impact and outcomes. At the institution, foundational learning is no longer viewed as prerequisite content but as the first measurable site of momentum and a key determinant of both student progress and institutional sustainability (Coleman *et al.*, 2021). The redesign was part of a broader shift toward embedding learning science into early curriculum touchpoints.

### *1.4 Review of Literature*

While retention in foundational education has been widely studied [For example, see Aljohani (2016), Sanders *et al.* (2016), and Venkatesamy *et al.* (2021)], little is known about how scaffolded cognitive development influences persistence through improved academic success. This review synthesizes the literature on gateway course outcomes, student success factors, and instructional scaffolding to position the Learner Journey Framework as a promising response to this gap.

Previous research consistently identifies foundational or "gateway" courses as key predictors of college success. For instance, Swan *et al.* (2019) and Mitra and Zhang (2021) found that performance in early writing courses has a significant impact on persistence, particularly in online contexts where students face additional barriers to access and support. These findings align with DiTommaso (2024), who emphasizes that skill development in composition is closely correlated with success in credit-bearing coursework.

Faculty consistency and presence also contribute substantially to persistence. Coleman *et al.* (2021) point to a clear issue: when foundational courses are delivered unevenly, students notice. It affects not just learning outcomes but also equity. Ahn and Davis (2019) contribute to this understanding by demonstrating that a sense of connection—to peers, instructors, and the course—can positively influence persistence, particularly for students who often feel peripheral to academic life. Both findings reinforce what this framework is designed to do: structure the course in a way that builds connection and consistency into the experience.

Scaffolding is a key pedagogical strategy for supporting skill development and learner autonomy. McGuire (2024) and Piamsai (2020) demonstrate how well-structured scaffolds in writing-intensive courses can enhance students' confidence, motivation, and output, particularly when combined with peer and faculty feedback opportunities. Kellen and Antonenko (2017) highlight that scaffold interactivity, not just presence, significantly impacts learners' self-regulating ability, especially in asynchronous courses.

Technology-enhanced scaffolding further supports learner autonomy when implemented thoughtfully. Murshed *et al.* (2021) outline a neuro-control feedback model for formative learning, which resonates with the AI-supported GPT scaffolding described in Robinson (2024). These tools help mitigate cognitive load while

fostering analytical thinking by guiding students rather than supplying their answers. Such models align closely with the Learner Journey Framework's implementation of a purpose-built GPT designed to assist learners without diminishing original thought.

Although these studies point to the promise of scaffolded instruction and technology in developing writing skills and confidence, few connect those strategies directly to measurable course persistence. This case study takes that step. It moves the Learner Journey Framework from theory to practice to examine whether an integrated model, validated by research, can improve student outcomes and persistence. The goal is to affirm theoretical alignment and assess practical traction. This study addresses the gap between what we know about instructional design and what we have tested at scale in real classrooms. That gap is where this work lives and where it seeks to contribute evidence that can inform both research and practice.

### *1.5 Theoretical Framework*

The Learner Journey Framework is not a loose collection of theory. It is a blueprint built from classroom realities and the limitations of surface-level interventions. The foundation of the framework reflects a constructivist approach. Knowledge is built through practice, reflection, and feedback rather than being handed over in prepackaged chunks. That idea shapes how instruction is phased. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development informs the way learning tasks are sequenced—stretching students just far enough while ensuring support is in place (Vygotsky *et al.*, 1980). Student agency is not aspirational here; it is operationalized through tasks designed to stretch capacity while remaining achievable with structured support (Robinson, 2025).

Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) structures the learning arc. Students begin with a foundational understanding and are intentionally guided toward more in-depth cognitive work. The framework leans on the principle that students cannot demonstrate critical thinking until they have been equipped to interpret, apply, and analyze. Each step is intentional, designed to prevent cognitive overload and disengagement while enhancing rigor and focus.

None of this is incidental. Each module was deliberately constructed backward from the intended learning outcomes, utilizing established backward design principles (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This approach ensures that content and assessment are not just aligned; they are inseparable from the skill progression students need to master. Every activity, discussion, and assignment was designed to move students forward, particularly in the areas required for success in credit-bearing English courses. There are no throwaway tasks or generic templates here. The design reflects intention at every step.

The framework additionally integrates emerging research on academic belonging, scaffolding, and equitable outcomes. Students from historically marginalized groups often benefit most from structured, feedback-rich learning environments that help bridge prior gaps in preparation (Robinson, 2025). To that end, incorporating AI-supported instructional tools offers scalable, personalized scaffolding while maintaining faculty oversight (Robinson, 2024). The GPT scaffolding functions like a digital checkpoint, available when needed but structured so students still own their cognitive process. The goal is not just to deliver support but to time it with learner readiness, helping students stretch without falling off.

Together, these elements form the operational backbone of the Learner Journey Framework. It is not a theory layered on top of content but a comprehensive design strategy built to drive persistence by aligning challenges with support at every learning phase.

### *1.6 Case Definition and Boundaries*

This case study focuses on the Spring 2025 redesign and implementation of Reading and Writing Strategies at an associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degree-granting institution based in the Upper Midwest, which offers campus-based and online degree programs. It examines six-course sections, with special attention to the sections where a faculty collaborator implemented the full Learner Journey Framework. The case is bounded by one academic term within the context of a fully online undergraduate writing remediation course but also examines the previous four terms for comparison.

### *1.7 Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness*

As the creator of the Learner Journey Framework and curriculum and assessment lead for the course redesign, I acknowledge my dual role in constructing and analyzing the case. This insider perspective provides deep contextual knowledge and necessitates transparency and critical reflection. This case study incorporates triangulation from course design documentation, faculty implementation, and institutional data to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Efforts were also made to maintain rigor through reflective journaling, peer debriefing, and cross-validation with external retention frameworks.

## 2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design supported by embedded descriptive statistics. The design enabled in-depth examination of instructional implementation across course sections with varying degrees of alignment to the Learner Journey Framework. Emphasis was placed on capturing how instructional fidelity, student engagement, and institutional constraints shaped course outcomes.

Rather than testing hypotheses, the analysis focused on descriptive contrasts—particularly those related to student persistence, academic performance, and the usability of theory-aligned design in practice. A case study approach was selected to examine the dynamics of implementation in real-world instructional settings.

### 2.1 Data Sources

Multiple types of data were used to understand the implementation from different angles, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Data Sources Used in the Reading and Writing Strategies Implementation Case Study

Data Source	Description	Purpose
Instructional Documents	Curriculum maps, scaffolded assessments, AI-generated raw content	To assess alignment with the Learner Journey Framework
Assessment Artifacts	Module-level assignments, prompts, and simulations	To evaluate rigor and cognitive progression
Quantitative Course Data	Submission rates, final paper completions, withdrawal/failure stats	To illustrate persistence and success outcomes
AI Engagement Logs	Interaction counts with the GPT tool (24 of 70 students)	To measure the uptake of scaffolded AI supports
Blackboard Analytics	Messaging logs, response tracking, student interaction data	To gauge faculty presence and consistency

### 2.2 Units of Analysis

Each course section served as a unit of analysis. The primary faculty collaborator taught two sections that received the full implementation. In comparison, the other four sections, though delivered with the same curriculum, did not meet the same threshold for faculty participation or instructional engagement required by the framework. These contrasting levels of fidelity were treated analytically to examine how the framework functioned when fully enacted versus partially applied.

### 2.3 Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize performance data (e.g., final paper submission rates, overall pass/fail outcomes) and AI tool usage. The numbers were not used to test a theory—they helped show what changed when the framework was followed closely. Qualitative materials—including instructional communications, rationale statements, and design notes—were reviewed for alignment to the framework, evidence of implementation friction, and instructional adaptation. These insights were manually logged and interpreted in conjunction with outcome data to construct a contextual narrative of how the framework was applied.

### 2.4 Implementation Timeline

The development and deployment of the redesigned Reading and Writing Strategies course occurred on an accelerated six-week timeline, compressed significantly from the university's typical three-month development cycle. This rapid pace tested the resilience and adaptability of the Learner Journey Framework. The timeline below outlines key milestones:

- **Week 1:** Full curriculum audit and instructional redesign completed. Learning outcomes and assessment structures were revised to align with the principles of Bloom's taxonomy.
- **Weeks 2–6:** Raw instructional content was generated and handed off to the instructional design (ID) team in waves. While the ID team processed the material, they defaulted to primarily text-based delivery that did not align with the intended multimodal design.

- **Week 6:** A media contractor was brought in to produce video-based learning supports for each module after friction with the ID team revealed a misalignment with the intended instructional approach.
- **Week 7:** The course was finalized and launched in the learning management system (LMS).
- **Weeks 8–13:** The course ran for six weeks across all sections.

This timeline reflects the adaptive nature of implementation and the responsiveness required to ensure instructional integrity despite institutional and process constraints.

### *2.5 Trustworthiness and Credibility*

Trustworthiness was supported through the use of varied data types, which enabled comparison among instructional plans, delivery records, and student outcomes. Although not formally triangulated within a coding framework, the convergence of results across qualitative and quantitative inputs provided a clear view of instructional fidelity. Engagement was sustained through active authorship and facilitation of the course, rather than detached observation, and thus reflects practitioner insights rather than formal ethnographic fieldwork. I kept design notes and reflections throughout the process to document decisions and track the evolution of the course. Findings are presented with transparency, enabling readers to assess the framework's relevance and applicability to their instructional contexts.

Institutional approval for the study was obtained in alignment with internal review protocols. No personally identifiable student data was used, and faculty contributions were anonymized in reporting.

This methodology honors the complexity of foundational course redesign and foregrounds the contextual factors often overlooked in retention research. It is structured to surface insight into not just what was implemented but how—and under what conditions—design principles translate into academic impact.

## **3. Findings and Implementation Narrative**

### *3.1 Elevation of Rigor through Curriculum Redesign*

The original Reading and Writing Strategies course primarily focused on lower-level cognitive tasks, with the majority of objectives falling at Level 2 (Understanding) on Bloom's Taxonomy and only minimal engagement at Level 3 (Applying). The course structure lacked opportunities for students to engage in higher-order thinking or to develop structured academic writing skills.

The redesign was intentionally designed to raise the bar. New objectives pushed students beyond summary to skills such as structured writing, analysis, and critical evaluation of sources. Faculty concerns early on were real—they worried about asking too much from students at this level. However, once we laid out how the scaffolded sequence built those skills gradually, most agreed that the shift made sense and remained optimistic. These changes were operationalized through tasks requiring APA integration, structured paragraph and essay writing, critical reading, and source evaluation. Initial faculty concerns regarding the appropriateness of these elevated expectations were addressed through clear pedagogical scaffolding, which demonstrated how the learner's journey progressed incrementally through cognitive stages, building readiness and confidence.

### *3.2 AI-Enhanced Curricular Development*

AI played a central role in content development. Content was built from the outcomes back, using Bloom's Taxonomy to shape how students moved from basics to deeper thinking. Each piece was written to help students progress from understanding and applying to analyzing and evaluating without skipping the in-between steps. The content was scaffolded to ensure that students could progress from understanding to applying and eventually evaluating and synthesizing information.

Simulations were embedded to foster decision-making and discourage reliance on generative AI. In Week 6, a media contractor was brought in to address gaps left by the initial ID implementation, developing video-based learning aids for each module to enhance engagement and reinforce instructional delivery.

A custom GPT tool was deployed in Module 4 to support students in brainstorming and outlining their process papers. The tool was specifically configured to prevent direct answers and instead guide students through reflective questioning. It was built to support thinking, not replace it. It didn't offer outlines or draft sentences. Instead, it asked students to name their own process, list their own steps, and think critically about how to organize them. The tool followed strict rules: no answers, no structure. It asked questions that helped students clarify and refine their own ideas. It acted more like a coach than a tutor, reflecting back what students said and helping them think more deeply. This was about supporting writing without short-circuiting it. Usage data

showed that 24 out of 70 students interacted with the tool, an engagement rate of 34.3%. That early traction suggests students will use scaffolding when it's built to guide rather than do the work.

### *3.3 Design Alignment and Iteration with the Instructional Design (ID) Team*

The ID team supported the development of this course while managing their standard 3–4 course development cycle, which typically spans several months. Their involvement, though not part of a formally assigned timeline, contributed meaningfully to the build and also created some pressure points due to the accelerated schedule. This context is important in understanding how design choices and timing challenges emerged during development. Throughout the process, a few design alignment challenges came up. The ID team raised concerns about deviations from standardized design models, including:

- Faculty-led discussions used as assessments
- Quizzes with multiple attempts
- Use of graded simulations
- Estimated module hours exceeding thresholds

Leadership supported a shift in how the course was categorized, moving it from a standard Q1 build to a foundational development, which allowed for more flexibility in applying institutional standards. This shift allowed for greater flexibility and ultimately endorsed the innovative approach taken. We used meetings to get aligned on why these choices supported how students think and learn, not just how they check boxes in a template. That shift helped move things forward.

### *3.4 Challenges in Instructional Design Implementation*

Despite overall collaboration, several implementation challenges remained. Most of the AI-generated content ended up in the course as is, without the instructional support it needed to fully align with the framework. Key issues included the grouping of assessments at the end of modules, which disrupted the intended instructional flow, and the consolidation of smaller formative quizzes into fewer, higher-stakes assessments. Recommendations to address these issues include tighter integration between content and assessment placement, more modularized checks for understanding, and early involvement of the ID team in the scaffolded logic of the design.

### *3.5 Faculty Implementation Challenges*

Only one instructor fully implemented the learner journey as designed. The other sections, though given the same curriculum, did not show comparable faculty engagement or feedback delivery. As a result, one highly cooperative instructor was selected to pilot the implementation and provide feedback, allowing for a controlled observation of framework fidelity and its influence on student outcomes.

### *3.6 Results from Engaged Faculty Implementation*

The average final paper submission rate in the course over the four terms prior to full implementation was 63.3% (Figure 1), while the average fail rate was 34% (Figure 2). These benchmarks establish the context for understanding what changes occurred when the framework was followed as designed. Data from the first term of full implementation, following those four baseline terms, demonstrated significant improvements: the final paper submission rates increased to 77.8% (vs. 64.1% in the preceding term), and the fail rates decreased to 21.4% (vs. 32% in the preceding term) in Spring 2025 Term 1. In addition, students engaged more frequently in higher-order tasks, including APA formatting, source integration, and critical evaluation



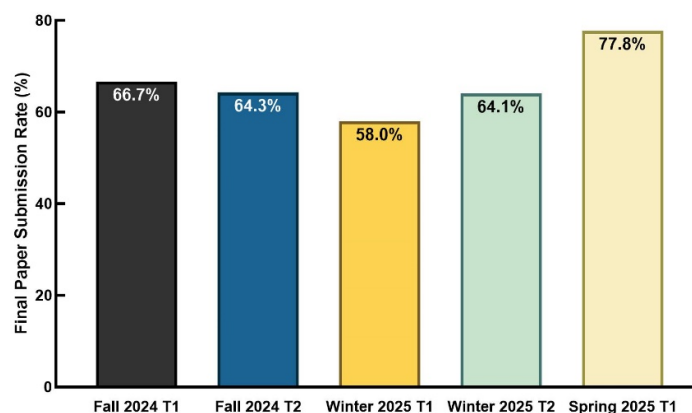


Figure 1. Final Paper Submission Rates by Term. Full implementation of the Reading and Writing Strategies course was done in the Spring 2025 Term 1.

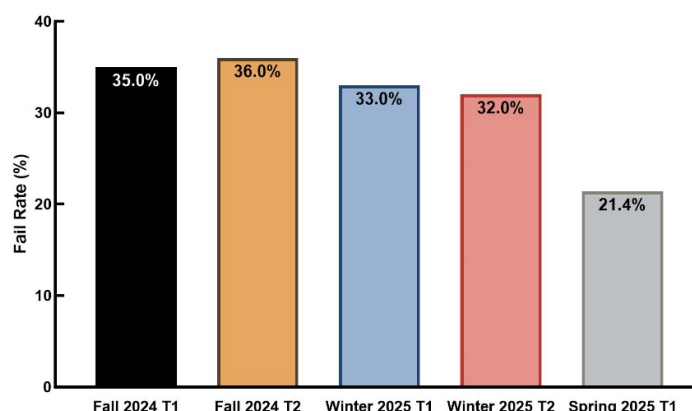


Figure 2. Fail Rates by Term. Full implementation of the Reading and Writing Strategies course was done in the Spring 2025 Term 1.

Together, these shifts reflect not just higher performance but a more sustained student journey: students stayed longer, completed more, and engaged with more challenging tasks without falling off. The Learner Journey Framework can push rigor higher without pushing students out. It shows that cognitive lift and student persistence do not have to be in tension; instead, they can grow together when the structure supports both.

#### 4. Discussion

This case study investigated whether the Learner Journey Framework, initially validated through theory, could have a practical impact when applied in a real-world course. The effectiveness of AI-enhanced, scaffolded curricular design was most evident in sections where faculty closely followed the framework.

Early in the process, leadership raised concerns about whether the elevated rigor was realistic for students in a developmental writing course. Those concerns were valid and helped shape the scaffolding sequence. Each phase of the learner journey was deliberately designed to build capacity without overwhelming students. The structured progression, aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy, created space for critical thinking while managing cognitive load.

Throughout the development process, institutional friction arose, particularly in response to non-standard assessment formats, the modular hour load, and the use of simulations and multiple quiz attempts. These tensions were addressed through ongoing dialogue and resolved through collaborative adjustments, including leadership support to reclassify the project. This flexibility made space for innovation while remaining aligned with institutional priorities.

Approximately a third of students used the GPT tool introduced in Module 4. That nearly a third of students

chose to use the tool voluntarily suggests that well-designed scaffolding, particularly when integrated through technology, can meet students where they are and support engagement without adding pressure. It was designed not to generate content but to guide students through structured brainstorming and outlining. It supported independent thinking by offering scaffolded prompts and reflective cues. While usage was limited to a subset of students, its application demonstrated the value of embedded AI tools in reinforcing cognitive scaffolding and supporting progress toward higher-order objectives. These patterns are promising, though not conclusive. The study does not isolate variables but highlights the possible contribution of design consistency to observable student success.

At the same time, the outcomes highlight a critical variable: implementation consistency. The framework's design can only carry so far if faculty engagement and instructional delivery do not match its intent. Instructors who fully adopted the approach saw improved submission and persistence rates. Others, working from the same curriculum but with a lower level of interaction, did not achieve comparable results. This pattern highlights the importance of aligning instructional design and delivery to ensure seamless operation.

The role of the ID team in this build also raised practical issues. Content delivery was heavily text-based, and assessments were placed at the end of modules rather than integrated with the instructional material. The compressed six-week build contrasted the institution's typical 3–4 month development cycle, during which instructional designers manage multiple courses. This further highlights the need for flexible design timelines that support innovation without overburdening instructional teams. While the timeline constraints were real, these choices affected how students moved through the course. Bringing a contractor to build media components helped offset some of these limitations. Future iterations may benefit from earlier ID collaboration focused on logistics and aligning with scaffolded instructional logic.

More broadly, this case underscores the potential for AI-enhanced development to support curriculum builds under time pressure, provided it is grounded in sound pedagogy and adequately funded (Ajayi & Pub, 2023; Robinson, 2024). The combination of backward design, layered support, and outcome-driven assessment offers a framework that could scale, but only if implementation is consistent and faculty are supported in applying it.

Retention in foundational courses is unlikely to improve solely with template or content changes. It changes when learning pathways are structured to support growth and when the systems that deliver instruction are flexible enough to support innovation (Peuker & Schauss, 2015). This case offers one example of how that alignment can begin. The increase in final paper submissions, along with a decrease in failure rates, indicates that cognitive scaffolding, when implemented through outcome-driven design and layered support, can help students meet high expectations. The custom GPT tool, used by over a third of students, illustrates the role that targeted, embedded technology can play in extending faculty reach and reinforcing learner independence. While it is impossible to isolate the GPT tool as the sole driver of success, its uptake and purpose-built design reflect a shift in how we can deliver just-in-time support without compromising academic integrity.

However, results from only one high-fidelity implementation underscore a critical caveat: a well-designed course is insufficient. The framework depends on complete instructional alignment—consistent faculty engagement, targeted feedback, and a commitment to the scaffolded learner journey. Without these elements, even the strongest curricular model risks becoming another content shell. This highlights a broader issue in higher education course delivery: inconsistent implementation undermines even the best pedagogical designs (Aslam *et al.*, 2024; Pak *et al.*, 2020; Shaw, 2014).

The challenges with instructional design handoff further emphasize the need for deeper collaboration between curriculum architects and those responsible for technical deployment, an issue raised by several other studies (Halupa, 2019; Mueller *et al.*, 2022). While the ID team admirably supported the build, given institutional constraints, assessment sequencing, and modality integration gaps impacted the learner experience. A more embedded instructional partnership from the start, where the rationale behind design choices is shared clearly across teams, may help avoid this misalignment in future builds.

Notably, this project surfaced one of the most underexplored links in retention-focused research: the relationship between cognitive design and student persistence (Stavredes & Herder, 2013). As both architect and evaluator of the course, I was positioned to observe how design decisions translated into delivery. While this perspective introduces bias, it allows for real-time responsiveness to implementation challenges. These results reinforce the core principles of constructivist learning theory and Bloom's Taxonomy, which suggest that knowledge builds through supported progression and that rigor becomes attainable when cognitive demands are sequenced rather than stacked (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Too often, retention is framed in terms of engagement or motivation. This study suggests that better-designed cognitive pathways, which make learning



feel possible and progress visible, might have just as much impact. It is not just about getting students in the door or welcoming them; it is about creating a lasting impression. It is about building courses that meet them where they are and guide them toward where they need to be.

Although the findings reported here are based on one course, implemented over one term, with one faculty lead delivering the framework with complete fidelity, the broader relevance of this case stems from the structure of the design rather than the number of students or sections. The framework's application demonstrates how aligning cognitive load, instructional sequence, and embedded support can yield better outcomes without compromising standards. Future research should more directly investigate how structured cognitive progression shapes student confidence, persistence, and course completion in foundational learning environments. Scaling the framework across disciplines, examining long-term outcomes, and testing how to build faculty capacity consistently are critical next steps.

If retention improves in meaningful and measurable ways, we must move beyond discussing student support as something separate from instruction. This case highlights the positive impact on students when learning design itself becomes the support.

## 5. Lessons Learned

This implementation surfaced several vital insights that extend beyond the specific context of the Reading and Writing Strategies course. At every stage, the effectiveness of the work was shaped not just by design quality but by the collaboration and systems that supported or constrained its delivery. These insights emerged in the context of an accelerated six-week build, an atypical schedule for the institution, which magnified the need for fast, coordinated decision-making.

What emerged most clearly was the interdependence of different elements; faculty engagement, ID support, technological scaffolding, and collaborative decision-making did not function in isolation. When one piece lagged, it impacted the others. When they aligned, the framework held.

First, collaborative decision-making proved essential. The course's most significant breakthroughs—from reframing assessment structures to resolving design conflicts—emerged through constructive dialogue and collaboration. Innovation was possible when teams engaged with curiosity and clarity, even under tight timelines.

Second, AI was a powerful design tool, but only when paired with intentional human oversight. The objective-driven content generated by AI requires thoughtful vetting and contextualization to maintain instructional integrity. This reflects what Kellen and Antonenko (2017) describe as the need for scaffold interactivity to support self-regulated learning in online composition environments. The GPT tool in Module 4 further demonstrated that well-structured AI applications can enhance learning, but only when carefully configured to align with outcomes and avoid shortcuts. Its success also points to a broader opportunity: AI can serve as a flexible learning companion when designed to reinforce cognitive engagement rather than bypass it. This form of tool-mediated reflection may offer a scalable support mechanism for students developing academic writing skills that bridge classroom instruction and independent application.

Third, the handoff of curriculum development and instructional design exposed gaps in training and communication. Instructional designers worked diligently within a compressed timeline; however, gaps in understanding regarding AI-generated content, sequencing, and assessment logic impacted the course flow. These challenges echo concerns raised in instructional design literature about the need for shared mental models and consistent training when integrating AI or adaptive tools into existing workflows (McGuire, 2024), notably when instructional theory and content generation are decoupled. Moving forward, ID teams may benefit from more explicit expectations, earlier involvement, and shared frameworks for evaluating scaffolded content.

Fourth, consistent and well-supported faculty engagement was essential to success. The leadership's willingness to reclassify the project created space for instructional experimentation while maintaining institutional alignment. The student persistence and performance improvements were tightly tied to the one section where the instructor implemented the whole learner journey. This underscores that even the strongest course designs depend on committed delivery. As Piamsai (2020) found, even strong scaffolds require consistent instruction for learners, especially non-proficient or at-risk writers, to fully benefit. Institutions looking to adopt similar frameworks must think not just about what is built but how it is supported at the point of instruction.

Lastly, integrating a purpose-built GPT tool demonstrated how thoughtfully deployed technology can effectively support independent learning. Students used it to structure their writing process without outsourcing their thinking. It served as an embedded checkpoint that guided, not replaced, cognitive effort.

Across all five areas, one theme remained consistent: curricular innovation is not a plug-and-play product; it is a process that depends on design logic, faculty buy-in, ID alignment, and the proper use of tools. When these pieces come together, foundational courses stop being barriers and start functioning as launch points, doing the job they were designed to do. Thus, institutions looking to replicate this work will need to invest not just in frameworks but also in the conditions that enable them to function, including space for design, support to deliver, and flexibility to iterate.

## 6. Summary and Future Directions

The course redesign demonstrated the pragmatic implications of implementing a theory firmly grounded in established pedagogy. Additionally, it highlights that the successful teaching and learning outcome does not emerge from a good idea alone; various interdependent factors, such as faculty, design, and support, must align. As a result of the combination of a well-developed theory and the collaborative efforts of different actors, students showed up, stayed in, and finished stronger in the sections where the framework was implemented as intended. Final paper submission rates climbed. Fail rates dropped. While this study did not disaggregate outcomes by subgroup, the framework's emphasis on clarity, progression, and support suggests a potential for reducing equity gaps, particularly in foundational courses where those gaps often widen.

Future research should look more closely at how the framework supports equity by disaggregating outcomes by race, income level, and first-generation status. While this study focused on overall trends, understanding how different student groups engage with the model is essential. It's not enough to raise success rates in general—we need to know who benefits, how, and where support needs to go next.

Its theoretical foundations have been previously outlined in Robinson (2025), which outlines the five pillars of the Learner Journey Framework: Cognitive Scaffolding, Instructional Alignment, Faculty Presence, Relevance and Belonging, and Transparent Progression. This case study offers early evidence that the Learner Journey Framework can be effectively translated from theory to practice when fully implemented, with students successfully completing tasks that previously stalled them.

This supports what the framework set out to prove: foundational courses can raise expectations without increasing failure rates if the proper support is in place. The course employed backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), and constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1960; Robinson, 2024) to guide students from understanding to structured writing and evaluation. The custom GPT tool, as previously described by Robinson (2024), helped students think through hard work rather than skipping it.

Future practice should prioritize several key strategies to sustain this level of impact. First, continued collaborative refinement between academic and design teams, especially focusing on formalized time for dialogue, clarity around design logic, and greater institutional flexibility in timelines and standards when piloting high-impact innovations, will be essential. Second, instructional design teams need clear frameworks for evaluating and adapting AI-generated content. Training that emphasizes the pedagogical purpose behind scaffolded flow, assessment sequencing, and modular alignment can help preserve the integrity of outcome-based builds. Third, faculty engagement must be treated as a condition for success, not an optional enhancement. Institutions should invest in training, feedback systems, and implementation support structures that reinforce fidelity to instructional design. Even the most carefully designed courses risk becoming static shells without this alignment. As McGuire (2024) and Piamsai (2020) note, scaffolding is only effective when consistently applied, especially in writing-focused environments.

This work reinforces that well-placed scaffolding and the strategic use of technology can help students achieve more remarkable academic growth. The focus must shift from making things easier to making the work sense (Kellen & Antonenko, 2017). Innovation does not require compromising standards; with the right systems in place, we can raise them. The course redesign is not a template. It is a test case that shows what is possible when all the pieces work together. For institutions seeking to move beyond content delivery and toward intentional learning design, it offers a flexible, theory-grounded model that can be adapted across contexts. When adopted at scale, these practices can improve course outcomes and broader institutional retention and progression benchmarks. Its next test should be across multiple foundational courses with varied faculty to further evaluate consistency and scalability.

To successfully scale the Learner Journey Framework across additional course sections and instructors, future implementations must address variability in faculty engagement and delivery. This case revealed that even with a

shared curriculum, outcomes diverged sharply when the instructional model was only partially applied. Scaling this framework will require intentional systems of faculty onboarding, instructional coaching, and fidelity monitoring. Institutional strategies might include peer mentoring, implementation rubrics, and structured debriefing sessions to support consistent delivery. Moreover, exploring how faculty with differing pedagogical backgrounds interact with the framework can surface critical insights into necessary adaptations for broader adoption. Fidelity cannot be left to individual discretion if equitable outcomes are the goal—it must be supported systemically.

While the course redesign points to real potential, these findings are limited to a single implementation and instructional context. They offer a practical starting point for further research, including how design fidelity scales across faculty, whether AI tools influence different learner profiles differently, how support systems shape long-term retention, and where equity gaps might be narrowed through design, including how design fidelity scales across faculty, whether AI tools influence different learner profiles differently, how support systems shape long-term retention, and where equity gaps might be narrowed through design.

This case presents an opportunity to reevaluate the connection between learning design, faculty practice, and instructional infrastructure in practical terms. Foundational courses are high-stakes spaces. When we structure them for growth instead of remediation and scaffold students toward academic challenge rather than away from it, they become entry points for persistence, confidence, and long-term success. It is one example of what it looks like to take big ideas and turn them into practical, scalable design choices that support students.

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