Learning to Ride the Waves: Making Decisions about Placement Testing

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Writing assessment is, as any reader of these pages knows, a complicated and contextual process that involves assumptions about teachers, students, curricula, and literacy. As interest in writing assessment has exploded in the past decade, the scholarly community has developed rich guidelines for approaching assessment. Foundational work––such as Edward White's Teaching and Assessing Writing, Brian Huot's "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment" and his (Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning, Bob Broad's What We Really Value, and more general assessment scholarship such as Grant Wiggins' Educative Assessment, just to name some recent work––has outlined principles for high-quality performance assessment. The development of portfolios and increased attention to the role of reflection in the writing process, have spurred the development of any number of innovative classroom and program assessment practices. It is easy to think that it is a good time to be in the business of writing assessment. Theory and practice are developing at a fast clip amid robust debates over how best to approach this work; at the same time, the principles underlying the debates are sound. Scholars in a field built on the assumption that literacy is complex, that assessment should respond to the myriad situations in which writers will need to use their abilities, and that assessment should foster good performances by teachers and students can be proud of their contributions to assessment reform in writing classrooms and programs reform.

In this era of interesting assessment scholarship, placement testing occupies a vexed position. In some respects, it is one of the most vital areas of assessment. The development of Directed Self-Placement (the term first articulated in Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles' 1998 "Directed Self-Placemen: An Attitude of Orientation,") has heightened interest in placement testing and articulated a thorough critique of older forms of placement test-

ing. However, these critiques often suggest that DSP, while not problem-free itself, solves the problems of, and thus should replace, other placement mechanisms (see Edward M. White's preface to Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices [Royer and Gilles] for one example: although not an uncritical endorsement of DSP, White concludes: "[n]ow we may be able to dispense altogether with the huge expense in time and money of placement testing, while maintaining the benefits of placement" [vii]). Thus other forms of placement testing receive little recent attention.

Even before the growth of DSP, placement testing occupied a curious place in our ongoing scholarly conversations. Many publications describe placement approaches (for example, George Ronald Abraham's account of the institution of a holistically scored writing sample at Hinds Junior College; a CompPile search on placement generates hundreds of hits, many on little-cited pieces such as Hendricks' 1940 report "Exemption from Required Composition"), but as time passes these descriptive pieces tend not to be cited often, if at all, in later discussions. Although it is generally acknowledged that a range of placement procedures is in current use, a short and simple history of writing assessment is generally accepted as presenting progress: direct writing samples were an improvement on indirect measures of writing, portfolios were an improvement on impromptu holistically scored samples; directed self-placement is an improvement on other procedures. Kathleen Blake Yancey points out that it is better to conceptualize the movement as waves, ebbing and flowing, rather than as distinct stages, offering "trends that constitute a general forward movement, at least chronologically," although there are "those [waves] that move forward, [and] those that don't" ("Looking Back" 483).

Placement has received the most serious attention in rough histories of assessment in terms of critique. There is a fine tradition of critical analysis of the limits of various placement techniques. Take, for example, Thomas Hilgers' remarks on placement for basic writers, in which he argues: "[b]ad assessment is what gets most students labeled as 'basic writers.' Bad assessment drives the curriculum and the evaluation of most basic writing courses; and bad assessment keeps educators from devising paths of learning that will increase the likelihood of success for all student writers" (69).

Hilgers' main target is the array of indirect measures that are used for placement at many institutions: Nelson–Denny or other reading test scores, SAT or ACT scores, or anything other than an actual writing sample from a student. He makes a cogent argument that encapsulates critiques frequently leveled at indirect assessments. Hilgers notes that timed, impromptu exams, a common placement mechanism, do not conform to the guidelines promulgated by the Conference on College Composition and Communication

(CCCC) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). These guidelines, formulated by the CCCC Committee on Assessment, note in part that "Any individual's writing 'ability' is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing [. . .]can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high-stakes decisions" (432). Hilgers challenges us to interrogate the assessments used for all students, but particularly those for basic writers, suggesting that assessment reform is one way to achieve significant improvements in curricular experiences for all our students, not just basic writers. If placement methods are developed that recognizing that writers should be evaluated on their ability to display a range of skills in a range of contexts, and recognizing that all writers display their abilities differently on different occasions, then teachers and students alike would benefit from assessment. Good assessment has good consequences; bad assessment has bad consequences.

This statement is a common theme in the scholarship of writing assessment and likely accepted as common sense by readers of these pages. Yet our collective reluctance to address the ways in which placement testing, in all its forms, has local consequences, is unfortunate. Placement testing, which is practiced at a majority of colleges and universities (Huot, "Survey" 56) has significant consequences for students and is their first encounter with college writing instruction. Thus, it deserves our considered attention, examination, and debate. Other areas of assessment (the role of reflection, the purpose of grades, just to take a couple) have developed lines of scholarship in which issues are debated; placement scholarship tends to present a series of preferred models (indirect scoring, impromptu samples, portfolios, DSP) or "how we do it" reports. Placement decisions, among the most local of all assessment decisions, must necessarily be balanced against local constraints including budgetary allocations, turnaround requirements, and student backgrounds. The fact that the existing literature on assessment focuses much more on classroom assessment than placement assessment makes it all the more difficult for administrators to handle these local constraints in theoretically grounded ways.

In this essay, I examine some of the particular challenges that face administrators overseeing placement programs. My task here is not to defend or criticize particular placement methods, but rather to explore the ways power and politics play out in our placement decisions. Ultimately, I argue that placement deserves our considered and sustained attention. Although it is true, as Edward White cautions, that "good placement is not cheap" ("Importance," 83), administrators can and should develop a well-theorized placement testing program, attentive to the needs of all students, even in the

face of budgetary and time constraints. Although directed self-placement is a wonderful process (one which my campus has recently adopted it), it is not the only responsible option open to campuses. If we focus less on the method of assessment and more on how the placement assessment functions in the academic lives of our students, we will engage key questions about the interpretive decisions placement ultimately rests on. Placement testing is most students' first contact with the theory and practice of first-year writing programs, and we would do well to make that first contact as inviting and theoretically sound as possible. To do so, we need to think less about placement as mechanism and more about placement as an opportunity to communicate. Placement is perhaps the first part of our programs that communicates to students.

Placement in Context: One Program's Story

Since placement is a local decision, I want to open with the story of the history of placement in my own program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). I do so to illustrate the ways in which the placement system's values communicated (or failed to) with students. IUPUI is a large, comprehensive urban state university serving a wide range of students. However, this demographic is changing because of several factors: a growing community college system across the state, rising admissions standards, and the decreasing age of entering undergraduates. Given these changes, our course offerings have also changed. At one point, we offered two levels of basic writing, but as the pool of entering students placing into the lower level slowly shrank, we eliminated the latter course. Two years ago, we eliminated basic writing and established a stretch program modeled after the Arizona State University program (see Glau for more information).

The earliest placement systems at IUPUI were classroom-based. Since students were not expected to come to campus for placement tests before registration, they could register for any writing class they wished, and a placement test in the first week of class (dis)confirmed the students' placement. This system was created to ensure that every student got individualized attention at an important moment in the college writing experience and that writing teachers made the decisions about where students should start. It communicated to students that we needed to know them to make good placements. At the same time, it was unwieldy, to say the least: teachers spent the first week of the semester reading initial writing prompts and moving students into the proper level of writing course. The hallways were awash with students and teachers moving around, settling class sizes; teachers were sometimes forced to switch class preparations if it turned out that more or fewer sections of a given course needed to be offered. The chaos

proved to be that system's undoing, and it was eventually replaced by a timed writing sample and grammar exam. At some point in the 1980s, around the time the writing process and portfolios were came the curriculum, the grammar exam was dropped. Faculty felt the grammar test poorly introduced the process-based curriculum of the courses. However, they prized the holistic scoring sessions in which each timed sample was scored by two or three readers, using a 1-to-6 rubric (6 being the high score). Those who participated in the scoring sessions regularly valued the chance to talk about writing without grading, and all faculty felt that the request for a writing sample showed students that we cared about their work.

This holistic scoring method continued until 1994, the year after I was hired as director of placement. Over time, the scoring rubric had been revised with participation from all placement readers—almost all part-time faculty—in response to curricular changes. But influenced by my experience at the University of Michigan's English Composition Board pilot portfolio project, Broad's scholarship on communal writing assessment ("Portfolio Scoring" and "Reciprocal Authorities"), as well as placement changes at the University of Pittsburgh and Washington State University, IUPUI faculty began to question the wisdom of placement systems that required strict adherence to a rubric, even one they had devised. We wanted a system that prized teacher expertise more, a system in which we didn't need to push away everything we knew about students from our classroom expertise. So we switched to an expert rater system, which was in use from 1995 through 2004 (see Harrington for more information).

An expert rater system emphasizes the value of teacher expertise, and it puts placement decisions in the hands of experienced course teachers (the details of theory and practice are discussed more fully below). William Smith's account of his work at Pittsburgh helped us design our approach. We asked placement raters to make their central question while reading, "Does this placement test look like the kind of work successful students do in my course at the start of the semester?" In many ways, the move to an expert-reader system hearkens back to the original IUPUI placement system, one in which the teachers' roles were central. Our expert rater system asked, fundamentally, "What course does this student need?" Teacher experience provides an equitable base from which to assess placement tests in a centralized program that provides ongoing faculty development, frequent opportunities for teachers to interact with each other, and regular review of curriculum and assessment practices. In our previous holistic system, readers' decisions revolved around which descriptor on the holistic scale best described the text in question; if questions of course placement came up, as was frequently the case, readers were supposed to push them aside, and often confessed to

guilty feelings over the difficulty of this task. In the expert reader system, readers note the appropriate placement. At first, two people read every test, but study showed that if the first reader felt the student was appropriately placed in Comp I, the second reader was overwhelmingly likely to agree. We dropped the second read in this situation. This system allowed us to devote more energy and time to the reading of tests on the borders of the course boundaries. (see Harrington for a full description of the data).

Our placement system thus brought its assumptions in line with our teacherly knowledge. We knew that in our classes students arrayed themselves on a performance continuum, and the expert-reader system similarly relied on an assumption of performance continuum in which clear exemplars of a category (for example, "Comp I students") were easy to recognize, and where the edges of the continuum were harder to discern (see Richard Haswell's "Rubrics, Prototypes, and Exemplares: Categorization Theory and Systems of Writing Placement" for a thorough discussion of categorization theory and its relation to placement and assessment). Writing courses never exactly matched each students' abilities and competencies; some students develop more quickly in some areas than others, so a student may well fall between the boundaries of two courses. Our placement system tried to take into account the fact that students' texts display a variety and range of abilities, and to allow readers-as-teachers to balance this variety and range of abilities in making a decision about the placement. We also assumed that for teachers to know which students belonged in their classes, they needed regular conversation with colleagues. Our program's portfolio reading system ensures regular conversation among teachers about students' abilities, assignments, and standards, and placement test readers are experienced teachers.

This expert-scoring system worked well until a radical change in the faculty occurred: the Board of Trustees raised tuition and replaced part-time faculty with full-time lecturers (nontenure track faculty who teach a 4-4 load). The number of experienced part-time faculty declined, and a number of longtime placement test readers became full-time faculty members. Interest in reading placement tests declined, and it became more difficult to recruit new readers each year. In addition, campus changes increasingly put pressure on academic departments to move placement testing to electronic environments so that students did not need to visit campus for testing before orientation and registration. Over the three-year period leading up to this change in the faculty, models of academic support on campus evolved. The campus generally moved away from remediation-based approaches, preferring instead to offer academic support to all students. A math assistance center opened, offering math tutoring for all students, and a variety of mentoring and supplemental instruction programs offered additional instruc-

tion or structured review sections for any student who wished to come. As the campus environment shifted, the writing placement test became one of the few programs offering additional academic support (through basic writing) to students identified in advance; most of the other support programs worked with students who self-identified or whose teachers identified them after several weeks of performance in class. A move toward guided self-placement, where students could elect the level of support they wanted in a writing course, brought us more in line with the campus's general approach to fostering first-year student success. We linked our communications about writing with other communications about general expectations at IUPUI; our outreach to area students and area high schools works closely with admissions and orientation. The writing program is now one of the first programs students encounter, and they see an invitation from us to be partners in a successful college writing experience.

As I write this, students are experiencing a two-day pilot of our guided self-placement system. We have created a three-stage process for new students. First, we ask them to reflect on their experiences and attitudes about writing, providing structured questions on a Web site they must access before orientation. Second, we provide them with brief course descriptions and sample work from each of the three first-semester writing courses (our stretch program, Composition I, and honors Composition I). Finally, we ask them to tell us which course they prefer to start in and to tell us a little about their decision-making process (full information is available at http://english. uc.iupui.edu). The program will go into full operation for students entering in January 2005, and we have planned an extensive validation study so that we can use students' experiences and course performance to help subsequent students make the best decisions possible. (While an extensive discussion of validation is the subject for another article, suffice it to say that the validation study will examine the correlations among course performance, previous academic performance, and self-assessment in terms of skills and attitudes about writing. It will be carried out in conjunction with our campus testing center and office for institutional research.)

Learning from Experience

I tell our story at such length to emphasize the ways in which the historical evolution of the English placement test is closely tied to faculty and institutional values and circumstances. While it is easy to look at placement testing as a technology—a method of placing students or allowing them to place themselves—such a view is reductive. It overlooks the contexts for placement, and it treats assessment as a mechanism rather than as a way of expressing a conclusion about students and their needs, as a way of inter-

preting available information about students so that decisions can be made about courses. Huot critiques Yancey's wave metaphor as explaining only "the sample of what students produce," demonstrating a "lack of interest in the way the work is analyzed" ((Re)Articulating 155). In my own campus' history, impromptu exams dominate the placement testing, when we look at the student writing sample as the focus. But if we look at the reading situation, we see quite clearly that the original system and the expert rater system share some important traits: both modes of placement prized teacher expertise and close connections to classroom performance, although the expert rater system better embodied those values. The move to guided self-placement was driven in large part by faculty change and by campus environment changes. To focus only on the role of a writing sample overlooks this key decision-making factor and misses some of the important elements that make our assessment situation valuable. Placement and registration are part of the orientation process, and writing classes are a central part of the first-year student schedule.

Although presentations of assessment methods usually (and understandably) privilege assessment technology, it is important to focus on the relation between method, interpretation, and context. Toward that end, I will briefly sketch available options for placement, looking at the ways in which each method of sampling or otherwise analyzing students' performance and reading or scoring those performances focuses attention on communication and interpretation.

Impromptu Exam Variations. The impromptu exam is an established form of placement testing, and despite the many criticisms leveled at it in the past decades, it continues to be popular. White's "Apologia for the Timed Impromptu" articulates the best case for such an exam, noting the clear limitations of impromptu testing "in definition of writing, in message to students, in reliability and validity, in effect upon teaching," the impromptu does not convey the richness of the intellectual moves involved in writing (44). Yet White notes that an essay exam may, in certain contexts, be "the best we can do in an imperfect world" (43). There is, of course, a running argument among scholars about whether it is more important to make pragmatic compromises or to hold out for utopian solutions (Alan Purves, in his response to White, argues for holding out for portfolios ("Apologia Not Accepted), and the essays in Belanoff and Dickson and Black et al. offer extended arguments in favor of portfolio implementation schemes).

I would like to turn utopian assessment impulses in another direction to draw attention to some innovations in impromptu testing. Not all impromptu placement tests need involve solely a sit-down-and-write-from-experience format. As White notes in his "Apologia," impromptu exams

certainly can foster a reductive view of writing, communicating to students that important writing need not involve drafting, reflection, research, and preparation. Yet there are ways to improve on the genre. For example, impromptu exams need not be limited to a single question and answer, nor does an impromptu setting rule out any reflection. At the end of an impromptu essay, students can be asked to reflect on the work that they have done. At the end of my program's impromptu placement test, we asked students: "Look back over your essay, and tell us what you think of it. Explain what changes you might make if you had more time to work on your essay." We added this question for several reasons. First, it seemed at least a start toward encouraging reflection, communication, and evaluation in the impromptu, by explicitly inviting students to comment on it. Second, it made the form of the impromptu much closer to the beginnings of the first assignment in our first-year composition class. Every draft turned in by every student is accompanied by what we call a writer's statement (others use the term reflective piece), so the test–although the students don't know it yet–becomes consistent with classroom practice. And third, it gave us a piece of information that became useful once we had moved to an expert-scoring system. If we are placing the writer (rather than the text), we wanted some small way to get information about the writer in addition to the text. We also wanted to signal to students that their perspectives on their writing matter on our campus.

Even more extensive and creative remodeling of an impromptu test can be found on other campuses. The University of Hawaii requires students to take a three-hour writing assessment that involves responding to readings provided during the test (a shortened version of a formerly five-hour, two-question process). As materials provided online by the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Writing Project describe, a three-hour morning session allows students extensive time for reading, drafting and revising in response to a question such as, " Read the following article and decide whether you agree or disagree with [author of provided article]. Then write an essay in which you describe and defend your position. (Your defense may include references to events in history; examples from literature, film, and television; your own experiences; and quotations from the article)". Online placement tests have become another environment for extended writing samples. iMOAT is a suite of Web environments for writing assessment that universities and colleges to customize an assessment to include different elements and different scoring approaches. Developed first at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and built out of collaborations between MIT, the University of Cincinnati, Depaul, CalTech, and Lousiana State University, iMOAT "allows

students to take assessments or complete assignments anywhere in the world. Moreover, is a flexible tool that facilitates best practices in writing assessment," according to principal investigator Leslie Perelman.

All these placement processes involve writers working alone, a key difference between a writing classroom and the placement experience. But this disjunction was addressed by a program developed at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which for a time incorporated two-hour writing classes for students taking the placement test during orientation. English teachers ran a class session and then had students write impromptu exams (Robertson); the exams were evaluated by two readers, one of whom was the teacher in the two-hour class. The miniclasses allowed students to brainstorm ideas and compare notes with peers before completing their exams, and they demonstrated a clear connection between classroom assessment and placement testing. Students were introduced to college-classroom culture even before classes began.

The Stony Brook placement process now uses an online testing system (see Program . . . for full details), which serves to introduce students to another dimension of campus culture before classes begin: online course delivery systems and supplements. The online process offers students academic reading to use in a short expository essay; it suggests a broad time frame for writing and revising before submission, and it assumes that a single essay can be a representative sample. Writing faculty read the online submissions and provide scores to students before orientation, enabling quick registration. This model requires less time during the orientation process, which may be one reason it replaced the classroom-based model. Whether that was an issue in Stony Brook's decision or not, it is a factor affecting decisions on other campuses. The use of faculty time and the scheduling of student-faculty contact during the placement, admissions, and advising processes are variables that affect the ways a program can make decisions about placement—or ask students to make decisions themselves.

Portfolios for Placement. Portfolios, regarded by Alan Purves as the best model of writing assessment because they allow evaluation in context (550), have been used for placement purposes since the early 1990s. Miami University of Ohio was the first campus to use portfolios for placement purposes, and by late 1993, the University of Michigan had a program established (it was replaced in 1999 by directed self-placement). At both institutions, classroom uses of portfolios preceded the placement uses. The faculty moved toward portfolios for entering students as a way to include in the assessment process a variety of writing samples designed to show the students' strengths over time and in different dimensions of writing. Portfolios allow students to submit several works in different genres to demonstrate their overall abili-

ties (see Belanoff and Dickson (1991) for an early treatment of this theme, which continues through more recent work such as the collection edited by Black, Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall (1994)). At Michigan and Miami, faculty spoke of placement portfolios as an assessment tool that allows for student choice, variety of work, and reflection.

Reflection is the very essence of a portfolio. As Yancey notes, reflection affords students a chance to explain what they've learned, demonstrates for readers the kinds of choices students make, allows students to learn through quiet reflection, and provides readers a look at the process that drives students' work ("Dialogue" 86). While there are other elements to a portfolio (formal essays, at the very least, and perhaps drafts of student work or informal writing assignments), all those elements intersect in the reflective statement,[1] in which the writer accounts for the "portfolioness" of the portfolio. Without the reflection, the pieces in the portfolio are a creation of the reader, who will make whatever connections she will. With the reflection, the portfolio is the creation of the writer, who constructs, selects, and interprets the portfolio for a reader (who then necessarily constructs, selects, and interprets while reading). Portfolio reading is dialogic, a dialogue begun by the portfolio writer in the reflection. Fundamentally, this dialogic assessment enacts all that the CCCC Position Statement calls for.

In some respects, portfolios represent the best that writing assessment has to offer. They are rich, multitextured, and dialogic; various genres are represented; the writer's process is represented; and context is provided throughout. It is a device that can communicate much about writing to new students. Note, however, that the mode of assessment itself does not guarantee all the theoretical benefits are present for each student. Portfolio assessments for placement can easily replicate the class biases of assessments based on impromptu writing because students from socially advantaged groups are more likely to have come from school systems which promote writing likely to be valued in college. Portfolio-based assessment assumes that students have a body of work that can be culled for the several submissions that allow for a rich evaluation. This state of affairs is not always in place, particularly in universities with large numbers of basic writers or nontraditional students. It is no coincidence that portfolio-based placement was pioneered at institutions with selective admissions, such as Miami University and the University of Michigan (for more information about portfolio-based systems, see Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall; Jessup, Cooper, and Harrington; and Willard-Traub et al.). It is easier to bring the riches of the classroom into placement testing when the student body generally brings with it educational riches.

College placement portfolios can affect high school classroom instruction in ways that can benefit a range of students. By inviting high school teachers to participate in scoring portfolios, the University of Arizona's Portfolio Placement Program (PPP) makes the task of communicating with area teachers a fundamental part of its program. The Arizona portfolio (as the Michigan portfolio once did) requires students to submit at least one piece of writing from outside of an English course. Thus, the Arizona portfolios system has influenced the proliferation of writing across the curriculum in area high schools (Borrowman 15). In addition, the PPP will examine portfolios compiled by high school juniors, offering feedback about their work, and the time frame for the portfolio compilation ensures dialogue between the writer, high school teachers, and college teachers. Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall similarly argue that the Miami portfolio benefits high school teachers.

Adding reflection to a placement process allows faculty who are making placement decisions to know more about students. Reflection usually takes place in a portfolio statement, since the various pieces of student work, accompanied by assignments and reflections, make it relatively easy to assess the complicated set of interlocking factors that seem to lead to success in a writing class. Because those factors that lead to success in a writing class are so little understood, the portfolio provides readers copious material that allows them to interpret the portfolio in a given curricular and institutional context. Hence the appeal of portfolios for placement testing in some institutions.

Faculty who have used reflective elements in their placement systems frequently describe students' reflective pieces as the most interesting and sometimes most important element of the placement system. In Miami's process, the portfolio letter describes the process used in writing the portfolio, important pieces in the portfolio, the place of writing in the writer's life, the writer's development, skills, or any combination of those as factors influencing placement. Kathleen Blake Yancey highlights some observations from Miami faculty regarding the portfolio letters that open every Miami portfolio:

> I found the reflective letter to often be the most interesting part of the packet, not only because of what it revealed of the individual but because of what it showed about the writer's attitude toward their own work. What a fascinating range of boastfulness, self-effacement, wit, rambling." Another commented, "The reflective letter fascinates me. It appear to be the place where the student establishes his/her authority as a writer; posi-

tions the reader and the writer." A third rather echoes the second: "I liked those reflective letters and narratives which situated the writer and his or her writings." ("Dialogue" 98)

A key point about portfolios is that the reflective component affords more power to the writer to shape the reading process. Reflective letters allow the writer to comment on the work, sharing evaluations or information with unknown readers. Thus the portfolio writer stands in a different relationship to the reader than does the impromptu writer, who traditionally has no opportunity to speak directly to the reader about the writing or rhetorical situation. Portfolios can communicate to students that their reflection is valued by the institution, and that can profoundly change the position of entering writers.

Expert Rater Systems

A changing of position and power plays out in another realm of assessment: the scoring method. Any assessment consists of writing sample(s) and the method of scoring or interpretation. Huot outlines certain shifts in assessment theory that have resulted in new scoring models that diverge from psychometric or holistic scoring methods, until recently the dominant mode of scoring for direct placement tests. These changes move the authority of the assessment away from a rubric and into the hands of teachers, changing the position of writing teachers in the assessment system. A holistic-scoring scale, which provides a rubric that describes various levels of achievement usually corresponding to a four- or six-point scale (see White, Teaching and Assessing Writing 298–303, for examples), depends on that scale for authority and consistency. But more contextual scoring models have expanded program administrators' assessment options. These systems, called expert-scoring systems, ask teachers to decide a student's placement (as described in the story of IUPUI above).

Expert-scoring systems are based on work done by William Smith (then at the University of Pittsburgh) as well as Richard Haswell and Susan Wyche–Smith (then at Washington State University)[2]. In the Pittsburgh system, teachers make direct decisions about placement, asking themselves only whether the student writer represented by the placement test belongs in the course they have most recently taught (Smith). Each test is read by at least two readers until its writer has been accepted by two readers into one of the available courses, such as basic writing or first-year composition. In the Washington State system, the concept of prototypical placement guides the two-tier system. In the first round of placement, raters ask themselves only whether the student writer represented by the placement test belongs in first-year composition. If the answer is yes, then placement is finished. If the

answer is no, or not sure, then the test is read by a second tier of more expert readers, who may decide to place the student into basic writing, or honors, or first-year composition (Haswell and Wyche–Smith; Harrington).

While these systems differ, both prize teacher expertise, and both respond to some difficulties that regularly arise in traditional holistic-scoring systems. Holistic scorers answer the question "What point on the scale most closely matches a description of this essay?" Expert scorers answer the question, "What course does this writer need to take?" But because holistic scorers (especially in a placement situation) are usually teachers who will be teaching the courses into which students will be placed, they want to use their teaching expertise to help them make decisions. However, such expertise is a distraction in a holistic session. Holistic scoring sessions are plagued by the intrusion of teacher expertise. Discussions frequently veer down tangents marked with remarks such as "This reminds me of a student in my class who. . . ," and the assessment leader must cut off those tangents with a reminder to "stick to the rubric." A scoring rubric is the centerpiece of a holistic-scoring experience, and it is imperative that holistic readers return to the rubric again and again in the scoring process to ensure consistency (see White, Teaching 208–21, for a more detailed discussion). But the primacy of a scoring rubric conflicts at times with teaching expertise, and the holistic system does not permit teaching expertise to play a central role in the discussion of the student's writing and possible placement. Expert-scoring systems capitalize on this experience, and they communicate to students that teacher expertise matters.

GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT

Guided, or directed, self-placement is one of the most interesting areas of placement scholarship at the moment. Until now, a discussion of placement has assumed that some sort of assessment is necessary—whether a mechanism review of existing data, such as an SAT score, or some method of scoring of a writing sample or portfolio. But some programs use other mechanisms for guiding students into writing courses, and directed self-placement does so without an artifact of student writing. The term directed self-placement is generally associated with the system developed at Grand Valley State University and described in a CCC article by Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles. However, somewhat earlier Colgate University used a similar system; it has since been discontinued and never rose to the prominence that the GVSU system has. Just as the move toward portfolios and the inclusion of reflective elements in a placement assessment place relatively more authority in students' hands than a traditional holistic assessment does, these uses of self-assessment place virtually all responsibility for placement in

students' hands. In the early 1990s at Colgate University, entering students were asked to identify not how well they wrote but "how well prepared for college writing [they] believed themselves - a sort of self-image self-tracking" (Howard 50). When this system was refined in its first several years, it was complicated by the addition of a sample writing assignment and sample readings in introductory general education courses that were required of all first- and second-year students. By providing greater information to incoming students, the university could help students make a decision based on information about college expectations and not simply on past self-image. Such assessment invites students "to put their past and prospective literacy experiences in interaction and to imagine the relative difficulty or ease with which they will negotiate the intervening terrain" (Howard 53). Howard labels this a "dialogic" rather than "hierarchical" judgment; the invocation of dialogue demonstrates the ways the student is situated within the system. The student's perceptions are valued and heard, even while the university provides information about its perceptions and values for the student to consider.

Similarly, the directed self-placement developed at Grand Valley asks students to imagine their collegiate futures and make their best decision about how to proceed. English department faculty meet with incoming students in large groups at orientation sessions. A brief presentation (and brochure) provides students with information that permits them to make the important decision about which writing course they would like to register for (and presumably most need), a preparatory course or first-year composition.[3] The faculty presentation explains, "The university has no interest in making you start with either course - that's why you are deciding. What we do have an interest in is your success as a student" (Royer and Gilles, "Directed" 56. The move to DSP was initiated by two factors: institutional data analysis showed no correlation between placement results and success in coursework, and the faculty understood that many factors influence student success, most of which the institution can only guess at in advance. Royer and Gilles note, "The fact is, we just don't know much about you as writers" ("Directed" 1), but the students do know themselves and are invited to share that knowledge with their new institution. Students can consider themselves well prepared for first-year composition, according to the English department's guidelines, if they have done significant reading and writing in high school, if they can summarize and analyze what they read, if they have written in a variety of genres, and if they have a good self-image as a writer and reader. Guidelines for high school GPA and ACT scores are also presented (preparatory students have ACT English scores below 70, and had only average high school GPAs). In this system,

students have the power to decide which course they will take - even if they fall outside the guidelines presented in the departmental brochure, they can elect to take a course if they feel prepared for it. The checklists presented to students are not intended as clear prescriptions, but as aids to reflection and self-assessment already developed and generalized from students in prior years. Royer and Gilles locate this procedure in the pragmatic tradition of William James or John Dewey. As they put it, directed self-placement

> has a pleasing feel about it with influence stretching in every direction: from a simple brochure at the hub, its vectors point to students, local high schools, teachers, and administrators. Its simplicity recommends it over the unreliability to test scores. Its honesty calls out to students and lures them in the right direction. Its focus is on the future and each students' self-determined advance. ("Directed" 61)

Both the Colgate system and the Grand Valley State system present students with real and important choices about their education. As described by Howard, the Colgate system provides more specific information about the courses (going so far as to include sample reading and writing assignments); the Grand Valley State brochure focuses on the course in more general terms and on characteristics of the student. Interestingly, Royer and Gilles' survey of students who elected to take the preparatory writing course showed that poor self-image was a compelling reason for that choice–but as Royer and Gilles' note, these students "saw themselves as poor reader and writers. In the past, we had done the seeing for them" ("Directed" 62). In these guided self-placement systems, students have the power to see themselves and their courses, and to make their own decisions. Directed self-placement has become increasingly popular. The essays in Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices (Royer and Gilles) offer critiques and alternate implementation models at large and small campuses.

A directed self-placement model refuses to make placement decisions for students. Royer and Gilles (1998) argue that most placement testing programs (even the rhetorically-based ones for which Huot argues) "share an assumption that simply doesn't sit well with [them] - that whatever decision made is to be made by teachers, not students" (63). So one option is, clearly, to reject the teacher decision-making model. Self-placement programs are slowly spreading, and more research into their successes, limitations, and effects will help other campuses evaluate this model. In "The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies," White cautions that students who choose to bypass developmental instruction are not always making good choices. He presents data from New Jersey and California that suggest students who do

not take developmental writing are at risk - although the students in those studies were not being provided with the advising advocated by a directed self-placement model.

Moving Ahead

Writing assessment has always been a difficult endeavor. As White notes, "Assessment of writing can be a blessing or a curse, a friend or a foe, an important support for our work as teachers or a major impediment to what we need to do for our students. Like nuclear power, say, or capitalism, it offers enormous possibilities for good or ill, and, furthermore, it often shows both its benign and destructive faces at the same time" (Teaching and Assessing, 3).

The current climate is that basic writing programs are under attack, and universities and legislatures are trying increasingly to hold departments accountable for the work writing program administrators do; assessment thus becomes increasingly important, and its Janus-nature will become increasingly apparent to writing teachers. Assessments imposed from outside seem onerous; assessments in conflict with dearly-held teaching principles are unwelcome. As long as debates continue about the existence of the first-year composition requirement (see Connors) or the utility of basic writing courses (see Bartholomae; Greenberg "A Response"; Shor; and Soliday), many writing teachers probably will remain ambivalent about the assessment methods used to support those programs.

While the debates will doubtless continue for the foreseeable future, good assessment is necessary for them to proceed or become settled. Echoing a theme frequently sounded in White's publications, Borrowman notes that if we abdicate our responsibility to consider issues of reliability and validity in large-scale assessments, "someone else—someone who does not view writing as a process that produces products—will take over the job of assessing student writing. The stakes are too high for our students and for our profession for us to let someone else decide how writing will be assessed" (16). If we are to maintain basic writing programs, we need to have good placement practices that create systems resulting in good decisions, ones that promote student success, the development of writing ability, and self-esteem. If we are to nudge basic writers into the mainstream and to create new curricula for first-year composition courses that have a wider variety of student capabilities, placement testing may be unnecessary, but other forms of program assessment will be. Good assessment programs will support good teaching and research efforts, and the best way for us to respond to our students' needs is to know what those needs are.

Validity is one of the most vexed concepts in writing assessment, and it is a concept not particularly well understood among those in English (see Huot, Re(Articulating), 45-51, for an excellent summary). It is important, to be sure, that we know that a test measures what it claims to measure, in this case, students' readiness for success in particular college writing courses. But this is a limited perspective on validity, and as both Huot and Peggy O'Neill note, scholars in educational psychology have made great advances in understanding validity. O'Neill summarizes: "validation arguments are rhetorical constructs that draw from all the available means of support. Validation studies include issues or reliability, construct definitions, consequences and other empirical and sociopolitical evidence" (50).

In other words, validity studies should consider elements of context and the use of results - how is the information collected used, used to what end and to what benefit for which groups? Part of the validity of a placement examination, I argue, lies in what it communicates to students and teachers about writing. As we contemplate assessment as a tool, we should consider what our choice of tool, in our context, will communicate to students about the nature of college writing. Even if elements of the local context push an assessment method (such as a standardized test score or impromptu) that has evident limitations, there are creative ways to consider how to shape the message the placement system sends to students. Considering assessment as dialogue will help us capitalize on the contextual aspects of an assessment system to help students adjust to college. Issues of context and validity should intersect the decisions about assessment methods from the start. Systematic assessments of students' needs, abilities, and preferences at the start of their college careers will enable us to develop curricula and support systems that will serve students and faculty well.

NOTES

[1]The reflective component of a portfolio goes by many names, depending on teacher and program preference. Writer's letter, writer's statement, portfolio cover sheet, letter or memo of transmittal, and portfolio reflection are all terms used for such writing.

[2]Smith, Haswell, and Wyche–Smith have left Pittsburgh and Washington State, respectively. The Pittsburgh system has changed somewhat because the writing curriculum it leads into has changed, but the Washington State system is still in use at that institution.

[3]The information provided to students can be accessed on the Grand Valley State English department's Web site: see http://www.gvsu.edu/english/selfplacement.htm.

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