Directed Self-Placement and the Figured World of College Writing

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Using the framework of figured worlds, I examine how incoming students make self-placement decisions. Although writing program administrators have demonstrated the consequential validity of directed self-placement, we must also address its substantive validity by understanding the relationship between direction and choice. I analyze what students write moments before selecting a first-year writing course, comparing the constructs they use to describe themselves with the constructs expressed in materials from the writing program. The identities students bring from the figured world of school are operative in their placement decisions. Emphasizing the identity work that directed self-placement requires, I call writing program administrators to use directed self-placement as a tool for linguistic, racial, and social justice by offering students more ways to locate themselves in the figured world of college writing.

Long before the first day of classes and perhaps even before their high school graduation, incoming students at my institution—a small, private liberal arts university—work through an enrollment checklist and begin imagining themselves as college students. They submit the housing application and wonder about dorm life; they designate a major and wonder if it will be too challenging; they register for first-year orientation and wonder if the wilderness option is actually a good idea. For conditionally admitted students, the checklist also includes directed self-placement, an online process through which students place themselves into a one-semester composition course or a two-semester stretch sequence.[1] After the placement process, students need to wonder less about their college writing requirement; they have received information about the course offerings, the way our program approaches writing, and even the extent to which we seem accessible and supportive. And the program needs to wonder less about its students; when students take the self-reflection survey and complete the writing prompt, we learn about the experiences, strategies, hopes, and insecurities they bring to college.

Placement is a moment of transition from high school to college writing, and I envision this moment as an entrance into a new figured world. Cultural anthropologists Dorothy Holland et al. define figured worlds as "cultural realms peopled by characters from collective imaginings" (51). In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, they introduce figured worlds to

examine how human identities emerge from participation in socially produced, culturally constructed activities (40–41). Figured worlds are varied and ubiquitous, and Holland et al. describe a world that my readers know well: "What if there were a world called academia, where books were so significant that people would sit for hours on end, away from friends and family, writing them?" (49). The figured world of academia is populated by recognizable characters such as professors, students, and administrators performing recognizable activities such as teaching, earning tenure, and granting degrees (59). Its discourse of *originality* and *brilliance* shapes how characters "evaluate their efforts, understand themselves, and interpret the positions they hold in the academy" (59). Before they imagine the figured world of college, students will have encountered the figured world of school, which Mary Louise Gomez argues is "one of the most ubiquitous and enveloping figured worlds in the United States" (48). The recognizable characters include students, teachers, and parents, and its primary activity is achievement. Students inhabit the identity of the *good student* by following the rules, sitting quietly in class, receiving good grades, participating in extracurricular activities, and earning awards (Gomez 48).

Figured worlds are conceptual, existing in the mind as simplified models. In these narrativized, dramatized models of reality, "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al. 52). These conceptual models help people understand the possibilities for identity and agency by assigning characters "a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state . . . as moved by a specific set of forces" (52). Figured worlds are also material, manifest in activities, discourses, and artifacts; they "*happen* as social processes and in historical time" and are learned, enacted, and reproduced through ordinary activities (55). How someone imagines a figured world shapes their initial participation in that world, and material experiences create a feedback loop in which that conceptual model is confirmed or challenged. With continued experience and feedback, participants in a figured world (re)construct their identity in that world, ultimately learning and inhabiting the world so well that they reproduce it for others (53).

Envisioning placement as an entrance into the figured world of college writing[2] highlights two key characteristics of directed self-placement (DSP). Through its direction element, DSP first offers students direct, material access to program artifacts, discourses, and activities. It takes seriously the idea that placement is "an opportunity to communicate" (Harrington 12). Placement is for most students their first material encounter with the figured world of college writing, and DSP initiates a feedback

loop that (re)shapes their conceptual model. In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae examines placement essays to understand how students invent the university and in particular its specialized discourse. What distinguishes DSP from the traditional placement methods Bartholomae describes is that DSP gives students more with which to invent—more material and discursive information about the figured world of college writing. Second, DSP requires students to position themselves in a figured world, claiming a recognizable identity for themselves. Self-reflection surveys are especially powerful venues for identity construction because they give immediate material feedback. When students check *agree* or *disagree*, they receive feedback on their initial participation: Do their answers mark them as experienced or inexperienced, confident or uncertain, insiders or outsiders? Does their conception of college writing align their first material experiences of its artifacts and activities? The moment of choice is a moment of identity construction.

In this article, I use the framework of figured worlds to address these questions: how do students make self-placement decisions, and how does DSP invite students to make those decisions? I argue that identity in the figured world of school and the figured world of college writing is a factor in the relationship between *direction* (the initial material encounter with the figured world) and *choice* (the positioning of oneself in that world). I begin by grounding my work in conversations about validity. Ethical critiques of DSP focus on its substantive validity, questioning the process by which students engage in the self-placement activity and make decisions. I also ground my work in conversations about student agency, positioning agency as the outgrowth of identity in a figured world rather than the exercise of individual power. To provide evidence for my claim, I analyze what students write only moments before they select a course, comparing the constructs they use to describe themselves and justify their course choices with the constructs expressed in program materials. My analysis reveals the extent to which particular constructs are operative and the ways in which students interpret and use those program constructs. I finally encourage writing program administrators to attend to the identity work and the identity politics of DSP. When we understand how students interpret their first material encounter with the program, we find new ways to make our world of college writing more accessible and inclusive.

Validity and Directed Self-Placement

Early advocates of directed self-placement emphasized its potential as a highly valid form of placement. Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles claimed

that DSP "may be the most valid procedure we can use," explaining that students know more about their educational background and current writing ability than others can know based on test scores or writing sample (69). To argue that a placement strategy is valid, WPAs must demonstrate not only the quality—the construct validity—of the measures themselves but also the "adequacy and appropriateness of interpretations and actions" based on those measures (Messick 5). Validity must extend beyond the meaning of test scores to their use and potential uses in a particular context.

Writing program administrators have addressed construct validity, arguing that placement materials—information, self-reflection surveys, and writing prompts—are valid only when they align with the local construct of writing and preparedness (Toth and Aull). In a 2010 study, for example, Anne Ruggles Gere et al. demonstrated that their existing DSP instrument did not align with the local construct of writing and thus lacked validity. WPAs have also addressed the consequential validity of DSP. Valid measures should effect appropriate results and positive pedagogical and educational outcomes, and WPAs have demonstrated that DSP produces acceptably high course grades and pass rates (Blakesley; Royer and Gilles) and that students are typically satisfied with their course choice (Bedore and Rossen-Knill; Blakesley et al.). In a subsequent 2013 study, Gere et al. validated a revised DSP instrument by confirming that students who place themselves in different courses produce qualitatively different writing.

Despite this body of validity research, directed self-placement has been subject to ethical critique. DSP requires students to imagine the future and, as Richard Haswell notes, that future—even with good information—ultimately involves an unknown course taught by an unknown teacher (Condon 205). The method further requires students to assess their present (and past) selves. If students do not or cannot assess themselves accurately, Haswell contends, self-placement "runs the danger of becoming directed self-fulfilling prophecy" (204). Especially troubling is the idea that self-placement decisions are manifestations of internalized racial and linguistic bias. Ellen Schendel and Peggy O'Neill speculate that race, class, gender, and disability influence self-assessment (219), and Rachel Lewis Ketai argues that self-placement materials often promote individualistic, white values and literacy practices (247–48). Placement materials may perpetuate self-fulfilling prophecy in which students are positioned as underprepared writers even before they are asked to position themselves.

I argue that writing program administrators can address these ethical questions by examining *how* students make placement decisions. We have focused on the design and consequences of placement measures, but we have not addressed the *use* of those measures. Which constructs expressed

in our placement materials are salient? How do students interpret and use these constructs? And what other constructs and narratives are at work? These questions interrogate substantive validity, which requires evidence that students are engaged in the performance task (Messick 6). An argument for substantive validity affirms that students are "actually engaged in meaningful self-reflection" that guides their decision (Gere et al. 2010). Michael Neal and Brian Huot urge WPAs to learn more about DSP decisions and to "consider the ways in which individuals can be influenced in their decision-making" (251). Attention to the decision-making process—and specifically to the moment of choice—has the potential to address ethical questions and to reveal the constructs that influence self-placement decisions.

Agency and Identity in Directed Self-Placement

Proponents of directed self-placement also highlight its potential to affirm student agency (Gere et al. 2010; Gere et al. 2013; Jones; Toth). Encouraging students to exercise agency, David Blakesley explains, requires institutional change at the level of bureaucracy and the level of collective imagination (15). When the university allows students to place themselves, it must "relinquish to its subjects at least some of its power to name and place" (29). Arguments about centering students and decentering traditional institutional authority strongly resonate with critical pedagogy, and WPAs envision DSP as a way to communicate their commitment to individual agency, autonomy, and empowerment. Affirming agency is not simply a positive feature of DSP but a guiding principle.

Conversations about directed self-placement define agency in humanist or modernist terms—as something that individual or collective subjects possess and use. Steven Accardi notes that, as a commonplace, "agency signifies the ability or capacity to act," and in WPA scholarship, the concept of agency is regularly associated with authority and power (1). DSP transfers agency (and power and authority) for placement decisions from teachers and administrators to students: one subject relinquishes agency to another. It is my argument, however, that this definition of agency limits our ability to see how agency and identity are mediated when students enter new figured worlds. In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland et al. resist fully modernist or postmodernist thinking, yet their theory accounts for the ways in which agency and identity are discursively constructed in figured worlds, through interaction with the artifacts, discourses, performances, and activities of those worlds.

Positioning agency and identity in figured worlds acknowledges that agency in a figured world emerges from an identity within that world. Identities are "unstable, especially as people are first inducted into a figured world" and develop with experience (Holland et al. 65). When people ultimately "develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds," their identity grants them agency (41). DSP accelerates the process of identity construction, but simply assigning students agency does not preclude the work of identity construction in a new world. Positioning agency and identity in figured worlds also foregrounds the full range of constructs, values, and narratives that students bring to placement. To this point, I have referenced the relationship between *direction* and *choice*, perhaps implying that DSP is a self-contained activity in which only constructs *internal* to the process are operative: students receive direction from the program and make a choice based on that direction. Yet Holland et al. describe how figured worlds exist in relationship with other figured worlds and with structural identity categories (129–32). Not all structural identities are "taken up, elaborated, and made hegemonic" (131) in all figured worlds, but all figured worlds contain structures of power, status, and privilege.

When students encounter the figured world of college writing, their identity and agency have almost certainly been constructed by their previous experience in the world of school. And in the figured world of school, identities are often shaped by sociocultural and sociolinguistic assumptions about literacy. For example, Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker examine the literacy practices of high school students who love writing yet struggle to pass their English courses, arguing that the figured world of school often fails to acknowledge personally significant literacy practices. When students accept these negative views of their literacy practices, they may develop identities as *bad students* or *bad writers* (245–6). From the perspective of figured worlds, educational inequality and injustice are systemic rather than the result of individual agency. Self-identified *bad students* may have difficulty accessing the world of school, and material feedback reinforces their identity as low-status characters in these worlds. When students enter college, they have positioned themselves (and have been positioned) in the figured world of school based on test scores, grades, and experiences. And they carry this identity as they attempt to learn the figured worlds of college and college writing.

Program Artifacts: Constructs Expressed

The directed self-placement system in my first-year writing program was prompted by a mid-winter request from the university to administer all placement tests online. I was disappointed because I enjoyed talking with students as they lingered after our summer orientation placement sessions, but the upheaval presented an opportunity: we could redesign our decade-old placement materials, and we could learn more about our students and their choices. Ten years after the stretch course was created, instructors in our program had come to believe that writing ability was not the only—or perhaps the most important—factor distinguishing students who benefit from the stretch course from students who succeed in the one-semester course. Also significant were their study skills and executive functioning, their motivation for writing and academic work. Program instructors identified two student identities made socially recognizable not only by their literacy practices but also by their actions, values, and motivations.

We began the revision process by defining three broad constructs that we would express in our materials and measure in the self-reflection survey. First, we defined *literacy practices/processes*, a construct that addresses writing proficiency in the program. We aligned all placement materials with the local construct of writing, addressing only the processes, genres, and rhetorical aims described in our course outcomes and assessment plans. Second, we defined constructs that differentiate the two course options: *pace of learning* and *level of support*. Students place themselves into courses that differ according to pace and built-in level of support, and these constructs indicate what we intend to measure: the ability to work at a particular pace with a particular level of support. Third, we defined constructs that characterize academic behaviors, testing the sense in our collective imagining that stretch sequence students and one-semester students are differently recognizable based on *study skills* and *motivation*.

Incoming domestic students receive a link to the placement website, which contains information about the courses and the program, video interviews with faculty and students, and sample reading and writing assignments. In the videos, a professor outlines the course options, and four students describe their reasons for selecting either the stretch sequence (English 100/102) or the one-semester course (English 101), as well as their experiences in the course. After incoming students review these materials, they begin a self-reflection survey run through Qualtrics. The survey contains twenty-five questions, all scored on a four-point scale. When students reach the end of the survey, we ask them to consider the videos, the sample assignments, and their survey responses before indicating their

course choice. We also require them to answer this question before clicking *submit*: "In one or two paragraphs, please discuss your reasons for choosing either English 100/102 or English 101. If you are unsure about which course is best, please also tell us about your questions and concerns." Students who need assistance are contacted by phone; these conversations are largely for reassurance and rarely result in a different decision.

To understand how students interpret and use the constructs expressed in the placement materials, two researchers coded each clause in the videos and the survey.[3] Summarized in table 1, the analysis reveals which constructs were most frequently expressed in the placement materials.

Table 1. Constructs Expressed in DSP Materials.

Construct	Percentage of Codes	Survey and Video Examples
Literacy Practices/Processes	37	the main points of this [sample] article pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of your essay
Level of Support	27	I met regularly with my professor revise it without additional assistance
Pace of Learning	19	write a draft of this essay within a few days the papers in English 101 came at me fast
Study Habits	10	manage multiple writing projects at the same time use a calendar and/or to-do list to manage my assignments and deadlines
Motivation	7	I have set high academic goals for myself in college I will work hard to meet them

The most frequently expressed construct, *literacy practices/processes*, encompasses several constructs Toth and Aull identified in a corpus of DSP surveys: *reading practices/abilities*, *writing practices/processes*, *development of ideas*, and *rhetorical awareness* (7). Three clauses reference the sample

reading assignment and thus *reading practices/abilities*, and the remainder reference writing processes such as invention, integrating source material, adapting writing for different audiences, and revision. *Literacy practices/processes* does not include linguistic background or familiarity with Standard Edited English, and our placement materials never mention usage, grammar, punctuation, or mechanics. By deemphasizing standardized language—and by rejecting the language of correctness and metaphors of clarity—we intended to avoid promoting narrow, racialized conceptions of writing and literacy. Yet the materials themselves may nonetheless promote standardized language simply by employing conventional linguistic features. As Bethany Davila argues, positioning language varieties as neutral or universally accessible ultimately positions them as superior (134–36), and our materials do not explicitly work against this implicitly superior positioning as they might.

The second most frequently expressed construct, *level of support*, references help, assistance, or support from faculty and classmates. Several survey questions include the phrase "without additional assistance," and one student shared in his video interview, "I never felt like I was totally out there on my own with my writing projects." *Pace of learning* was the third most frequently expressed construct. Coded clauses refer to time or speed, including the length of a semester. An English 100/102 student appreciated having "time for each big assignment," and survey questions asked students about their ability to complete particular assignments within a specified time frame.

Together comprising only seventeen percent of constructs expressed, *study habits* and *motivation* transcend subject areas but have particular meaning in writing courses. *Study habits* refers to basic organizational and project management skills, and it extends to "break[ing] up a major writing assignment into smaller tasks." *Motivation* addresses students' willingness to take a faster course when a stretch option is available, and it measures their motivation for writing and academic work. One survey question states, "I don't mind working hard to improve my papers," and an English 101 student shared that "it was a challenging class . . . I knew I would need to invest lots of time and effort."

These constructs begin to reveal socially recognizable identities. Some students are able to move through the writing process without extraordinary difficulty, entering college with strategies to manage large projects and meet deadlines. They are motivated to undertake academic work, which they find engaging and even enjoyable. Other students lack confidence in their ability to move through the writing process without extraordinary difficulty and/or assistance. Less willing to set ambitious academic goals,

they may lack some degree of academic motivation but value supportive relationships.

Student Responses: Constructs Interpreted

After the first several dozen students completed the revised DSP process, I was surprised by their written responses. Students were writing from across the country, but their words were stunningly similar—and they were often *our* words replicated verbatim from the videos and survey questions. When we looked more systematically at their responses, however, a more complex reality emerged: students indeed cited program constructs, but depending on their course choice, they interpreted and used these constructs in distinct ways. Students also cited constructs never mentioned in the program materials, and again depending on their course choice, they introduced different constructs. Their decision-making process was mediated by their identity in the figured world of school and their perceived distance from the figured world of college writing. Students with strong, positive academic identities already imagined themselves as college writers and recognized themselves as successful characters in the new world.

Over three placement cycles, students have written approximately 15,000 words explaining their decision to enroll in the stretch sequence or the one-semester course.[4] English 100/102 students wrote 443 sentences, and English 101 students wrote 307 sentences. (About sixty-five percent of students selected the stretch sequence each year, but they wrote shorter responses.) Using the five program constructs, the same researchers used the same coding procedures to analyze clauses in which students describe themselves or justify their course choice. We also produced an in-vivo record of external constructs—constructs the program did not express but that students used to describe themselves or justify their choice.

Students who chose English 100/102 cited *literacy practices/processes* most frequently, with the construct representing forty-six percent of codes (see table 2). They interpreted the construct as the specific ability to write "college essays," using it to evaluate themselves negatively. Identifying specific elements of the writing process with which they struggle (coming up with ideas, elaboration, revision), these students described their essays and their writing as *bad*, *weak*, *not great*, and *marginal*. Although the program materials never explicitly introduce standardized language as a literacy construct or use the word *grammar*, students frequently disclosed that they "have trouble with grammar" and that their "grammar is not the greatest." Another striking theme in their responses is their perception that a large gap exists between themselves and college writing—an entirely reasonable

feeling given the timing of the placement process yet also a feeling their English 101 counterparts do not share. They reported that their "writing ability is not yet college caliber" or "up to par with college essays." Because they do not yet identify as college writers, they envision the stretch sequence as a place to "adjust from high school to college writing" and become college writers.

Table 2. Constructs Expressed in 100/102 Student Responses

Construct	Percentage of Codes	Example Quotations
Literacy Practices/Processes	46	My writing is not up to par with college essays I am marginal at my writing skills and layout for a paper and what to do for different audiences
Level of Support	10	I want to work with my peers and professors when I have assignments I want to start off my college career with as much help I can get
Pace of Learning	31	The stress of a fast-paced class is not something I see myself in, and I would like more time to get my assignments done I am not one for going fast in school, I take my time on things
Study Habits	4	[The stretch sequence] can help me become more organized and help me get more things done I have the terrible tendency to slack off and procrastinate on larger projects
Motivation	9	I often am really lazy when it comes to it I do feel that I am a person who works hard to make my writing the best it can be

The second most frequent construct for English 100/102 students was *pace of learning*, representing thirty-one percent of codes. Students interpreted and used the construct in two ways: first, they applied the concept of pace to themselves. Although the word *slow* does not appear in program materials, students explain that *slow writers, slow readers*, and *slow learners* take slow classes. "When I was growing up," one student wrote, "I was the one taking baby steps rather than that big leap. I like to learn with little baby steps at a time." Another simply explained, "I have always been a slow writer." Second, students interpreted pace as a way to manage what they perceive to be a stressful, risky transition to college. "A slower speed could be better for me with the transition," a student who also identified as a slow writer reported, "almost like a warm up and then getting the hang of everything later." Students again perceived distance between themselves and the figured world of college writing, and they wanted to close that distance slowly and carefully.

Students who chose English 100/102 cited *level of support* and *motivation* relatively infrequently, and *study habits* represented only four percent of codes. When citing *level of support*, students explained that they have always needed "extra help" in school, just as they have always struggled in writing or learned at a slow pace. Although the program materials emphasize two kinds of support (support from peers in a small cohort and from faculty), all but one student wrote about only faculty support. Students who cited *motivation* shared their desire to become better writers and to work hard, but some referenced their lack of effort, propensity for laziness, and desire for a class that would be "smooth sailing."

Only ten percent of clauses written by English 100/102 students cited external constructs. All of these constructs represent reasons why students may not have developed an identity as a good student in the world of school. They include *high school grades*, *standardized test scores*, *learning disabilities*, and *extended time between high school and college*. The constructs *high school grades* and *standardized test scores* align with *literacy practices/processes* because students use experiences with standardized language and assessment to draw conclusions about their writing ability, and *learning disabilities* aligns—for students who report having dyslexia and receiving 504 plans or other learning accomodations—with a slower *pace of learning*.

Students who chose English 101 cited *literacy practices/processes* and *motivation* equally frequently, with each construct representing thirty-two percent of codes (see table 3). Although these students did not reduce *literacy practices/processes* to "college essays," they also used the construct as an evaluative tool. Compared with the negative, often specific evaluations English 100/102 students made of themselves, English 101 students

evaluated themselves positively and in generalities. They reported that writing is "one of my strengths," and they described themselves as "capable" and "confident" writers. And as I discuss below, students who evaluated their writing ability positively regularly grounded their judgments in external constructs.

Table 3. Constructs Expressed in 101 Student Responses

Construct	Percentage of Codes	Example Quotations
Literacy Practices/Processes	32	I am confident in my writing skills I feel like writing is one of my best strengths
Level of Support	3	I will use tutors who can provide me with some assistance if needed
Pace of Learning	25	I just want to get it over with When I used to do writing assignments, I'd always either get them done the day they were assigned
Study Habits	8	I believe my time management skills are good I will map out a way to get things done on time and not be cramming the night before
Motivation	32	I am ready to take a challenging class where I will have to work hard to achieve my goals I am ready to apply myself to my schoolwork and work my hardest

English 101 students interpreted *motivation* as the desire to undertake a challenge, and they envision challenges as positive. They perceived English 101 to be the more challenging course: "a challenge I would like to take on" and "an environment where I can be challenged and focus on my work." With their English 100/102 counterparts, these students also interpreted *motivation* as the willingness to work hard. Rather than expressing a desire

to become better writers, they instead expressed a general desire to "accomplish whatever is necessary" and "to put some pressure on myself so I can achieve what I want."

Pace of learning was another important construct for English 101 students, representing twenty-five percent of codes. They interpreted the pace of learning as the pace of college itself, believing that English 101 would not slow them down or occupy extra space: "I would rather just take one semester so that way I can make more room for my major courses." Many reported having already succeeded in the kind of courses they will encounter in college. One student explained, "I am confident in my abilities in a fast-paced English class because in high school I was taking an extra college course while completing high school, and this course was an English class," and another noted that he was "accustomed to writing multiple papers within two weeks typically." The construct of pace is not risky but materially familiar.

Although the extent to which English 101 students cited *study habits* and *level of support* was minimal, twenty-six percent of their clauses referenced external constructs. These constructs fell into three categories, all of which are associated with achievement in the figured world of school: *high school courses*, *high school grades*, and *standardized test scores*. When students offered evidence of their ability to write well and work at a fast pace, they cited their history of "excelling" and earning high grades in honors, Advanced Placement, honors, and "College English" courses. Reinforcing their identity as successful students, they finally cited their "good" or "solid" ACT and SAT scores, even if these scores are in some cases well below the university average. Students used these constructs as recognizable markers of good or successful students, and they employed them to position themselves in the figured world of college writing.

Marked and Unmarked Identities

Questions about substantive validity address the extent to which students engage in meaningful self-reflection—the extent to which program constructs are operative in the decision. For my program, examining what students wrote at the moment of decision produced answers and questions. Some findings build a case for validity: both students and the program cited *literacy practices/processes* most frequently, and English 100/102 students in particular cited the same writing practices (invention and development of ideas, adapting writing to an audience, revision) included in the placement materials; the critical construct *pace of learning* was also cited second or third most frequently. Other findings prompt validity concerns: students

did not cite *level of support* nearly as frequently as the program did, and English 101 students cited *motivation* with disproportionate frequency. And although instructors believed *study skills* was salient, that intuition was not validated. Understanding these findings is a necessary first step, but we must also understand better how students engage program constructs. Depending on the course they chose, students interpreted and used program constructs differently—and they used different external constructs to different ends. It is in this gap between direction and choice that I argue identity is at work. Students who arrive with normative, unmarked student identities in the figured world of school and/or school writing perceive little distance between themselves and the world of college writing, and they believe those identities will persist from one figured world to another.

In her work on basic writing, Joyce Olewski Inman argues that American higher education is driven by "expediency and linear norms" (1). The "standard plot" and "taken-for-granted sequence of events" (Holland et al. 53) in the figured world of college is characterized by "straight institutional lines" (Inman 1). Yet the presence of basic writers—and at my institution, the presence of conditionally admitted students—troubles these lines. Even before the moment they arrive on campus, they are oriented differently from their peers. Inman notes that the *beginner/expert* or *high risk/mainstream* binaries we use to characterize students create marked and unmarked identities: "To label the majority of the student body as normal, a portion of the body must be othered. This very act of designating writers as basic is part of what allows for the privileges experienced by more traditional students" (4). The essential institutional purpose of basic writing and other marked courses is to unmark marked students (4), and the basic writing classroom is a site of (re)construction from one socially recognizable identity to another.

The key distinction between directed self-placement and the traditional placement methods that Inman references, of course, is that students must mark themselves. And when students mark themselves, marked and unmarked identity categories nevertheless emerge. Students who chose English 101 imagine themselves as normative, unmarked students and writers. Because of their experience in high school, they do not perceive significant distance between themselves and the world of college writing; many believe they have already experienced its pace, challenges, and writing demands. Their initial, imagined identity in the world of college writing is confirmed when they select *agree* in response to questions about understanding the sample assignment and feeling motivated for college academics. Perhaps most telling, their unmarked identity aligns with their desire—characters in a figured world are recognizable through their desires—to

move through college in a straight, efficient line. The constructs of *pace of learning* and *motivation* enable these students to position themselves on the standard, unmarked plotline.

Students who chose English 100/102 imagine themselves as nonnormative, marked writers and students. They perceive distance between themselves and the world of college writing, distance expressed in their doubts about "adjusting from high school to college" and in their belief that their writing is "not college caliber." As they respond *disagree* to survey questions about their writing practices and ability to manage deadlines, their imaginings are confirmed and desires linguistically marked: *extra* time, *extra* help, an *extra* semester. Although these students selected a stretch sequence rather than a basic writing course, they envision the stretch course—the nonnormative option—as a way to become unmarked, to "allow them to 'pass' in the traditional academic setting" (Inman 2). Many students use orientational metaphors to explain their choice, noting that the stretch sequence will "start [them] off on the right track" or will help them "begin on the correct path." By orienting themselves differently, they hope to right themselves on the straight line.

As we developed our DSP materials, we heeded arguments from Ketai about the ways in which placement materials may promote ideologies that reproduce social inequalities. We asked if our materials assume a white habitus as normative (Behm and Miller), and our revision process included eliminating questions about reading for fun, high school requirements, comfort with usage conventions and standardized language, and those implying that "students who are 'prepared' for college writing have earned that designation through personal effort alone" (Ketai 149). By providing sample readings and writing assignments, we attempted to situate writing and self-efficacy in a specific context. Yet what distinguishes students who choose a one-semester course from those who choose a stretch sequence is identities constructed in the figured world of school and imagined in the figured world of college writing. The constructs students encounter during DSP reveal marked and unmarked identity categories, and they carry with them constructs that reinforce those categories.

Conclusion: Opening the World of College Writing

Writing assessment is an ethical activity, and writing placement is a racial, social, economic, and linguistic justice issue. With Toth, I believe that directed self-placement has the capacity—even the unique capacity—to promote social justice and foster more accessible and inclusive writing programs. Our placement mechanisms should make the figured world of

college writing as initially open and accessible as possible. Among the many things DSP communicates to incoming students is our humility. We tell students that we do not know their whole story, that we will not presume to know it, and that we invite them to tell it. Students tell us that story, however, within the parameters of a figured world. They "reproduce the narratives about their own identities, languages, and literacies that they have experienced through prior school-based assessment" (Toth 159), and their agency is indeed "interpellated by an educational lifetime of summative evaluation" (Howard 48). It is important to note that marked and unmarked identities have varied consequences: students may overplace themselves if their identity as a successful student does not materially align with college practices, or they may underplace themselves if their identity hinges on standardized test scores. As writing program administrators validate DSP programs and work for justice, we must do the technical and ethical work of understanding how students engage program constructs and how identity shapes the relationship between direction and choice.

To this end, disparate impact analysis should address not only the consequences of placement, as Asao Inoue argues, but also the decision-making process. Among the multiple measures we consider, we must know if students from particular racial, ethnic, gender, economic, and linguistic backgrounds engage program constructs—or bring external constructs—in ways that negatively influence their decision. For example, I have learned that students from a particular high school disproportionately choose English 101, relying on the external constructs of *high school courses* and *high school grades*. Yet their final course grades are below average, and their conception of *literacy practices/processes* does not align with that of the program. Their literacy identities constructed in the world of school do not transfer to the world of college. The analytical methods I use in this article provide one way of conducting this form of disparate impact analysis, as could interviews or focus groups early in the first year of college.

Based on what our analysis reveals, finally, writing program administrators must help students better engage program constructs. To make programs equitable and inclusive, we must help students understand our constructs well enough so that they do not simply reproduce narratives about their identities constructed in the world of school. Understanding how students interpret *pace of learning*, for example, has prompted my program to incorporate more concrete examples that outline exactly how many major assignments students complete in a semester. We hope concrete information will discourage students from applying slow–fast binaries to themselves and from thinking only about the pace of college. And WPAs must address external constructs we find problematic—that is, we must make external

constructs internal—to discourage students from reverting too quickly to marked and unmarked identities. Because standardized test scores often dictate which students are conditionally admitted, my program has deemphasized these scores to avoid replicating the inequity already associated with them. However, we plan to make the external construct of *standardized test scores* internal, explicitly instructing students that scores should not be a major factor in their decision.

Directed self-placement requires students to imagine a world of college writing, but it also requires writing program administrators to imagine their students. To make our worlds accessible and inclusive, we must be capacious in our imagining—characterizing students beyond marked and unmarked categories, beyond straight institutional lines. Program materials should offer students multidimensional ways to be recognizable in the world of college writing: students who choose the stretch sequence because they enjoy writing, students who desire more writing courses in their schedule, students who rely on the support of their classmates, students who struggle in their writing courses, and students who blossom as writers in college. Students may tell their stories using only standard plotlines and marked and unmarked characters, but we can open our worlds by projecting an array of recognizable characters moving through the figured world of college writing in varied plotlines.

Notes

1. Students are conditionally admitted based on a holistic evaluation. ACT scores below 21, SAT scores below 1000, and/or high school GPAs below 3.0 typically result in a conditional admission decision.

2. I use the phrase *figured world of college writing* in the same way that other scholars use *figured world of school* or *figured world of academia* (Gomez; Luttrell and Parker). The figured world of academia has recognizable characteristics, but it is differently enacted across contexts. I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive definition of the figured world of college writing, so the phrase *figured world of college writing* functions as a shorthand for how this world is enacted in particular institutions.

3. Two researchers coded all data, achieving 90% interrater reliability as calculated by percent agreement. Clauses representing two constructs were coded twice; for example, the question *I could write a full draft of this essay without additional assistance* was coded as *literacy practices/processes* for "write a full draft" and *level of support* for "without additional assistance."

4. All students have granted permission to use their survey responses and words (IRB 19–030).

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