
Teach, Not Test: A Look at a New Writing Placement Procedure

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A number of years ago I helped evaluate the writing placement procedure conducted during summer orientation by a large public university. I observed hundreds of students packed into a hollow auditorium and wedged into too small row seats, all diligently attempting to write a prompted essay in traditional blue books supported on eight by eleven and a half inch lapboards. The room was poorly lighted, overcrowded and un-air-conditioned in the middle of a very hot July. I was horrified. What kind of an essay could you or I write under such constricting physical conditions?

This scene reappeared vividly when the Writing Program staff at Stony Brook was asked in 1989 to re-examine the effectiveness of their summer placement test. We were asked to do so for all the wrong reasons—the University wanted to cut fiscal corners by scrapping the writing exam and using standardized scores instead. No one in the program agreed with this agenda, but, knowing that we would have to justify our summer budgets and testing expenses, we scrutinized our procedures carefully. What we found was unsettling indeed.

At the time our procedure, like that of the school I had evaluated, consisted of one two-hour essay exam: a three-part writing procedure consisting of freewriting, composing an essay derived from that freewriting, and then producing a metacommentary on the writing processes involved. For our test, the lapboards had vanished, the lighting was much improved and the air-conditioning worked. Students were still in a large lecture hall, but here there were large curved writing counters and individual chairs behind them instead of rows of seats. Still, both counters and chairs were bolted to the floor to prevent any movement by individual students or any interaction between groups of students. In other words, the physical conditions had improved somewhat but the atmosphere was still stiff, impersonal and uninviting, not a place at all conducive to engendering writing.

While these stark, unwelcoming conditions disturbed us, we were far more concerned with the exam itself. Although we had struggled for years to design a fair and non-traditional process for placing students, we realized that, under these “test taking” conditions, we hadn’t really changed much at all. While ours was not a traditional exam, it was still a test, an essay that supposedly measured a student’s writing ability by the evaluation of product only. Now we

were, and still are, a process-oriented program, emphasizing an holistic approach to language, collaborative learning, individual step-by-step development of student-generated papers and continuous revision based on peer and teacher responses to ongoing drafts. Yet our own placement procedure ignored most of these integral aspects of our program, though the metacommentary did provide some space for students to acknowledge and discuss their writing processes. If we truly believed that “the instructor acts as a guide and evaluator, responding to students’ work at each stage, commending, advising and encouraging during the process, rather than merely criticizing the finished product” (Lauer 64), then why were our process-trained writing instructors acting as monitors for a product-oriented exam? Why weren’t we practicing in placement what we so ardently advocated in our classrooms and courses? However unconsciously, we were obviously violating our own dicta about the teaching of writing by asking students to write under these circumstances. Fortunately, the solution here was equally obvious once we became aware of the discrepancy. We do believe in process; therefore, if we are to judge products for placement, we should observe, guide and evaluate the processes that produce them.

This realization led to the initiating of an unusual and new method of obtaining writing samples for placement purposes—unusual because we replaced a testing procedure with a teaching procedure that reflects our program’s philosophy and new because we believe this is the first time such a procedure has been implemented on the post-secondary level. In our new design, model English 101 classrooms replaced the old lecture hall sites, and writing instruction replaced former essay tests. Students attending summer orientation were divided into groups of twenty-five each (our standard 101 size) and for an hour participated in workshop activities that encapsulated the teaching that occurs daily in our composition classes during the regular semester. These classrooms were small, brightly lit, air-conditioned and furnished with movable individual desks for student-centered group activities. In short, they were writing classrooms, not testing sites. Interestingly, while we had started out just trying to accomplish our required placements for university writing courses without succumbing to accepting standardized test scores, we had inadvertently produced a format that introduced incoming students to a mini version of our writing courses. Although that was not our original goal, it was an invaluable by-product of our new design.

In brief, the new design encompassed all the aspects of writing our program emphasized: students in each class freewrote, shared and responded to the writings and then talked in small groups about topics generated within the class before putting pen to blue book and actually composing individual essays. A typical placement class began as all our writing workshops begin—with writing. As Donald Murray so aptly points out,

The first day of the writing unit should begin with writing, not talking [translation for talking: lecturing]. The student writes and the teacher writes. This information is, of course, a symbolic gesture. It demonstrates that the information in the course will come from the students. The students produce the principal text in the writing course. (14)

We believe that and, because we believe it, the placement opens with a private freewriting exercise of 5-10 minutes that allows students to relax (they have just arrived a few hours earlier and have already been subjected to dormitory assignments, a math exam and mass lunch), settle down, and flex their writing muscles. Here they can start to generate ideas on paper, their own ideas that will expand later in the class and eventually lead to an essay on a topic the students in each session choose.

Early on we had experimented with a number of topics and prompts; none had worked very well or satisfied the students or the teachers. The students had often detested a particular topic; the teachers had detested the resulting boring papers. We had forgotten a basic dictum: "The best student writing is motivated by personal feeling and experience" (Judy 38).

Encouraging such writing was something we had long practiced in our classes, but we had neglected to incorporate it into our placement procedure. To remedy this oversight, each placement class is allowed to choose a general topic. Individual students then narrow the topic and focus it to suit their own feelings and experiences. The result has been less complaining about the writing task from the students (after all, they chose the task) and more interesting essays for readers to evaluate.

That choosing occurs halfway through the class after a focused freewriting (15-20 minutes) on a topic the student considers appropriate for the day's essay. The source of the focus varies. Some teachers suggest a memorable experience associated with learning, others list very general topics on the board, and some just throw out common interest subjects to the class as a whole. However, the classes are not bound by any of these suggestions. The students are told up front that this second freewriting is not private but will be shared with their peers in small groups. Knowing this, they usually write more slowly and pause more often, obviously concerned about the reactions of the readers who will see this text.

Those readers, the small groups of five each, constitute the third stage of the model class, collaborative group work composed of sharing and responding. Because, "all writers need to know how readers react to what they have written," sharing and responding to student texts are integral parts of our writing workshops and placement classes (Lunsford 107). Here individual students talk with their peers in a comfortable, non-threatening setting and receive helpful feedback that can flesh out and enrich the essay they will eventually write. This sharing also incorporates the holistic elements of speaking/listening/reading/writing into our mini class. Each student in turn reads and receives oral feedback on his/her writing and then listens and comments on his/her peers' texts. As Stephen Judy points out, all these interlinked processes are essential to the creation of language:

The person creates language about his or her ideas that both displays them for self examination and allows them to be communicated to others. What gives this process its drive—its energy—is, first, that humans have

an intrinsic need to sort through and understand their experiences, and second, that they need to share their perceptions with others (Judy 38).

Both these needs are being met in our sample class: the two freewritings display knowledge to the students for self examination while the group sharing enriches and expands that knowledge through language interchange with others. After each group has discussed the topics generated by the freewriting, has chosen one to nominate as the topic for the placement essay, and has selected a speaker, the class reassembles as a whole. The speaker from each group reports on their topic and the reasons for choosing it. The teacher acts as scribe, listing the topics on the board and, after further discussion, the class votes to select a single topic. During this process, we have introduced them to another aspect of our 101 workshop, whole class dialogue. In orientation, this stage is usually less lively than the small group work (they are more uncomfortable and therefore more shy speaking in a larger setting) but it, too, is an essential part of our overall program.

At this point, before we take a five minute break and return to write the actual placement essay, teachers usually ask for student reaction (sometimes verbal, sometimes written) to the freewriting and group work and, surprisingly, such response is almost always positive. Individual opinions vary, but most feel the hour long class with its casual format, group interaction and class conversation reduces "test anxiety" considerably. Students like the social component of talking with other students, sharing ideas with peers and having a teacher available to answer questions and provide individual attention and general writing guidance. The freewriting rates as a positive experience, and a majority think this model class is a "fairer" (their word) way to place people, more personal and less stressful than a test with hundreds of people in a large auditorium. Others mention that actually being in a college classroom for the first time with a "real" teacher (again, their word) is a valuable orientation experience. Almost all feel that they write better essays in these circumstances.

These reactions all surfaced in the students' own words during the first trial year (1990) when we actually collected written responses from the 1500 freshmen experiencing the new placement procedure; with minor variations on a theme, those reactions have been echoed and expanded by other students in subsequent years. One anonymous student response that first summer effectively summed up our entire process and purpose:

I thought the class was interesting. I never took time to just sit there and write freely about anything. It showed me that I could write decently. It also took a lot of pressure off from a regular two hour exam. This gave time to breathe, relax and actually almost enjoy it. It also gave room for the student to make errors since forty five minutes was given to the final paper. It also gave the chance to see what others thought of your writing.

The teachers too prefer this new method. One TA with four years of teaching experience in our program outlined the general reaction to the new procedure when she wrote me this informal note:

Let me see how I can put it best — it was the best of times, it was . . . ? It was definitely different. Interesting, to meet with students and then never see them again. An interesting twist to the whole teacher-student relationship experience and concept. I prefer this because I get to know some people for a couple of hours, they get to know one another, etc., and then we're on our way. I found that I was full of pep and excited, describing [and] explaining the program to them and seeing their faces light up or look puzzled at notions like "owning one's writing," sharing one's ideas, using or discarding feedback, all the things I really appreciate about our program. Overall, I'd say they got a good sense of what we do here, how, and why, which is more than we ever gave them before . . . it's nice to de-mystify ourselves this way.¹

Is it possible that we have discovered a best of all possible solutions—a procedure that produces required placement results that is also preferred by the students, endorsed by the teachers and approved by the university-wide orientation program and undergraduate admissions? In fact, undergraduate admissions advisors are delighted with the orientation "class" and its positive effect on incoming freshmen. They feel the small class atmosphere and personal attention from teachers sends a very positive message to new students about the university and its commitment to undergraduate education. We think it sends an equally positive and up front message about the importance of writing in the college curriculum.

After four years, our new process is still developing, changing slightly from summer to summer as we evaluate student and teacher responses and try to incorporate their suggestions into our procedures. As for evaluating the "products" students in our model classes write, that procedure has been modified to better fit our program goals. Originally two experienced 101 teachers read each essay and placed students into ESL, Basic Writing (EGC 100), Writing Workshop (EGC 101) or advanced Writing Workshop (EGC 202) respectively. If both agreed, the placement stood. If they disagreed, a third reader was called in to settle the dispute. The modification of this process is simple: we still use two readers (and a third when disputes arise) but the classroom teachers comprise the reading committee; therefore, each teacher reads her class pieces and those of one other teacher. Thus the students are being placed by a somewhat objective reading (from the teacher who did not have them in class) and a somewhat subjective one (from the teacher who did and can add to the evaluation her observations about the student's processes as well). This subjective/objective balance and knowledge from personal observation help the committee to identify and place students with special problems or special abilities who might not have been spotted in a standard essay format. Importantly, this committee is always composed of ten to twelve teaching assistants who have all taught EGC 101 for at least four semesters (often five or six) before qualifying for these summer placement positions. Thus all are familiar with 101 writing and can accurately recognize students' levels and abilities. Additionally, these teachers participate in mandatory training sessions before placement begins. Their training includes a

review of classroom procedures and formats but basically concentrates on their practicing reading, scoring and discussing sample essays from previous placements. The criteria they apply are simple: Can these students pass 101? Or do they need extra help, another semester of writing, before they take 101? Or should they go beyond 101 into 202? Our practice sessions help reclarify our general standards every year.

Teachers participating in actual placement reading and evaluating interchanges each summer also comment on how this process improves their own classroom performance because these placement discussions give them a clearer sense of their colleagues' goals and standards. By integrating teaching, testing and evaluating into a single day procedure, we have also strengthened our own community of writing teachers.

Fortunately, we were able to do all this within our existing operating budget. We had already been allocated \$20,000/year by the University for placement under our old system; we simply used that allocation to pay the placement committee for teaching the sample classes and reading the essays. True, the TAs are working harder now—but not longer—actually teaching a class rather than only monitoring a two hour test. Most prefer it that way. Simple monitoring, they say, is just too boring.

But nothing is or ever has been perfect. Everything has a downside and our placement is no exception. Sometimes there are real logistical nightmares involved in our impromptu dividing up three hundred students into individual classes of twenty five each—including teachers shifting desks from room to room, the supervisor staggering beginning class times to accommodate last minute stragglers and our making sure each class has sufficient materials (blue books, pencils, scratch paper) for the constantly changing numbers of students in each room. But these are minor problems. The most serious downside is our inability to administer the procedure at times other than the formally scheduled placements. Under the old test format, a student who missed the scheduled exams could come into the Writing Center and take the test under monitored conditions anytime during the semester when we had space available and a tutor to act as monitor. Because the new procedure requires a student to participate in a class before writing the essay, it is no longer possible to let students do this on an ad hoc basis. Even though there were never more than six or eight students a semester involved in these special schedulings, our current format cannot accommodate them. We strongly feel that to ask them to write without benefit of the instruction and feedback of a class would be unfair; yet delaying their placements until a scheduled exam sometimes means—in the worst case scenario—that they have to put off taking their writing course for a semester. This not only delays their progress in their degree programs but also deprives them of a badly needed semester of writing instruction at the beginning of their college careers.

Overall, however, our current process seems to be working well on all other levels. We still consider possible modifications; ideally, our placement procedure will continue to change as our program does. Nothing here is etched in

stone. But the model class continues to emphasize collaborative learning, peer feedback, freewriting and writing as a cognitive process—all the elements that we feel are important to and inseparable from the teaching of writing. This makes the process much more than a placement procedure; it is also an honest encapsulated introduction to our program and its courses.²

While writing placement has always been a key factor in the failure or success of any writing program, over the past decade that placement has become more and more important as the programs themselves increase in number, size, variety and comprehensiveness. I am not suggesting that other programs adopt our specific procedure wholesale. If a program does not use freewriting or sharing/responding in its classrooms, it would be illogical to incorporate these tactics into a placement process. What I am suggesting is that individual writing programs consider developing their own placement procedures that accurately reflect their own writing classes. In other words, Stony Brook's experiment provides a general paradigm for future placement processes based on representative sample classes that emphasize the teaching of writing over the testing of writers. Whatever procedures individual programs develop can reflect their own pedagogy and philosophy. The essential point is that such a process should accent teaching, not testing, and provide incoming students with a realistic introduction to that school's writing program. The bonus is pedagogically sounder placement determined by writing samples obtained under college classroom conditions. One incoming freshman that first summer said it far more eloquently and concisely than I ever could:

Some people didn't like what we did—all the writing and talking and sharing. They wanted the teacher to tell them exactly what to do—how many pages, what kind of essay, how to write it. But the teacher didn't do that. Instead, she asked us what we thought, what we wanted to say. Nobody ever asked me that before and it's pretty scary, thinking on your own for the first time. But I liked it. I hope this is what college will be like.

For her sake and ours, I hope so too because that is our writing philosophy. We are here to help students discover what they think and how to express those thoughts their way. And our placement, like our classes, should always reflect that philosophy.

Notes

1. Then a TA in our program, Rita Kranidas, is a Stony Brook Ph.D now teaching at Virginia Polytechnical Institute in Blacksburg, Va. Her articulate letter, quoted in part here, is typical of other teachers' responses.

2. Statistics over the past four years reveal a noticeable shift in our actual placement percentages: Under the old system 82% went into 101, 8% into 100, 6% into 202 and 4% into ESL. Today 73% go into 101, 12% into 100, 10% into 202 and 5% into ESL. Although we have obviously trimmed off either end of the writing spectrum and placed more students into our basic and advanced courses, there has been no significant pass/fail percentage change in those courses.

Works Cited

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Announcement: 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference

The National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), in conjunction with the Midwest Writing Centers Association, is pleased to announce the 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference, on September 27-30, 1995, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Recognizing writing center diversity, the conference will offer many topics and presentation formats. Anticipated topics include: elementary, secondary and post-secondary writing centers; publishing, scholarship, and professional activity; writing centers and technology; writing centers in electronic environments; writing centers' new frontiers; special needs; administrative systems; mission statements and plans; a mentor network; writing center history; critical reconsiderations of theory and practice; disseminating research projects; developing outreach and service projects; initial and advanced staff training; defining NWCA'S agenda. The program will consist of workshops, interactive sessions, working sessions; demonstrations, poster presentations, and formal papers.

All interested parties are invited to submit proposals for the conference. Specific proposal guidelines and other relevant information are listed in the proposal form.

Deadline: February 1, 1995 (notification by March 1, 1995). For proposal forms and further information, contact Eric Hobson, Conference Chair, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Pl., St. Louis, MO 63110. Phone 314/367-8700, ext. 244. E-mail: ehobson@medicine.wustl.edu.