

## Placement and Instruction in Context: Situating Writing Within a First-Year Program

*Theresa Freda Nicolay*

In “Toward a New Theory of Writing Placement,” Brian Huot takes up a “conversation on writing placement procedures” (49) which he began in his earlier work, “A Survey of College and University Placement Practices.” Huot calls upon those of us who design and implement placement procedures to contextualize all of our writing assessment practices, whether they meet students as they enter our institutions or act as barriers to graduation. “It is a truism in current ideas about literacy,” Huot argues

that context is a critical component in the ability of people to transact meaning with written language. In composition pedagogy we have been concerned with creating meaningful contexts for students to write in. A theory of assessment that recognizes the importance of context should also be concerned with creating assessment procedures that establish meaningful contexts within which teachers read and assess. Building a context in which writing can be drafted, read, and evaluated is a step toward the creation of assessment procedures based on recognizable characteristics of language use. (1996, 559)

Huot attempts to move us away from “artificial” forms of writing assessment, such as the timed impromptu (which continues to be widely used), towards alternative emergent practices, practices that reflect our values and pedagogies as writing instructors. And while Huot has cataloged both new and old assessment procedures, other composition specialists have put forth innovative models for the remediation of first-year students, which should also occur within meaningful contexts. In the following pages, I will demonstrate how, at St. John Fisher College, we

have contextualized not only writing placement but the instruction of basic writers as well by embedding both within the layers of our first-year program.

The program itself is set within the larger context of the college core, which requires all entering first-year students to participate in Learning Communities (clusters of two, three, or four courses, all of which contain at least one section of composition). If we think of these elements as concentric circles, with writing placement at the center, surrounded first by Learning Communities and next by the college core, then we may envision basic writing instruction as the shuttle which moves among them all: students work in the writing center with peer tutors on papers for their English classes as well as their linked core cluster courses, and the thinking and writing skills they refine there are fundamental to the core curriculum as well as their majors.

### **Variations on a Theme: Some Current Models for Placement and Basic Writing Instruction**

At the same time that we at Fisher were piloting our new placement and basic writing program, Alice Robertson and her colleagues at SUNY at Stony Brook were taking stock of their four-year-old placement procedure. In "Teach, Not Test: A Look at a New Writing Placement Procedure," Robertson describes the shift from a two-hour essay exam to a "placement class" which, like their writing program, emphasizes process: "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" (57). Robertson and her colleagues created a context for the placement essay, thereby making the writing task more meaningful for the students. While Fisher uses this same process approach, ours takes place over a period of three weeks rather than one afternoon. The extended time allows us to employ a placement model that precisely correlates with our teaching model, and is, in fact, the first step in our first-year writing program pedagogy.

Changes in placement techniques don't always bring about changes in basic writing instruction. For example, Royer and Gilles, who describe their placement process as "directed self-placement," "agree that students should not be marginalized, but [we] think the most practical reconception of remediation does not involve eliminating basic writing courses, but rather thinking very differently about placement" (63). For them, different means allowing students to choose their own placement, with the help of a brochure containing course descriptions and student profiles

“In high school, I wrote several essays per year” in contrast to “In high school, I did not do much writing”). The authors argue that this process empowers students and circumvents the damage of remediation:

The power relations that are violated by taking away choices are not repaired by mainstreaming, which simply eliminates options, or by updating methods of administering and scoring placement essays, which continues to tell students that they are not ready to make their own decisions. (69)

I would argue, however, that the process actually disempowers students by asking them to make a judgment without the benefit of the expertise that their instructors possess. They are in college, after all, to gain some of that very expertise, yet when students fail to place themselves properly, they have only themselves to blame: “If they fail, they will, we hope, learn that a college education is a serious endeavor and that success often begins with a proper estimation of one’s abilities” (70).

In contrast, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, at the University of South Carolina, have developed a “Writing Studio Program,” in which all students are mainstreamed (like Fisher, they eliminated both the timed exam and the remedial course). Those students who need basic writing instruction—as well as those who volunteer for the studio program—take part in weekly meetings outside of the classroom. Placement is based on two writing assignments completed during the first week of class along with a portfolio of previous work. Once again, context plays a role:

Our approaches to assessment and instructional design must give student writers the attention required for their knowledge and assumptions to emerge in the company of those who are willing to listen and to critically and collaboratively explore connections to the politics and practices of writing assessment and instruction at a particular site. (65)

### **The SJFC Writing Program In Context: Historical Narrative**

St. John Fisher College is a liberal arts college of approximately 2,000 students, primarily undergraduates. Changing student needs and developing faculty pedagogical interests led the English department to make modifications in the structure of our first-year writing program. In the past, we offered both a remedial (English 100) and an introductory (English 101) writing course. For years, instructors of both courses used

the current-traditional model in which students study rhetorical modes and emulate the work of professional essayists. By 1990, however, many instructors had moved to a constructivist paradigm, and both courses became more process-oriented, with a portfolio system of evaluation and peer review groups for in-class work on writing. In spite of this positive change in teaching method, our first-year writing assessment measure, the TCW (Test of Competence in Writing), was a traditional one-hour essay exam taken by most students during orientation and not “functionally related” to our writing program, as Edward M. White recommends in his book, *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* (119). As is typical of this kind of placement procedure, students were not given an opportunity to discuss the topic, and revision was precluded by time constraints. Not surprisingly, lack of student investment in the topic, coupled with the artificial (decontextualized) nature of the assignment, produced mediocre writing with many surface-level errors. How could we, we wondered, make the writing assignment “real” for our students? Could a writing placement essay connect the discourse of their past lives with that of their future in academia? Would such an assignment lead to a truer picture of students’ writing abilities?

While arguing the virtues of the “timed impromptu,” which is a direct measure, in contrast to such indirect measures as the multiple choice writing exam, White admits that, especially when poorly developed, essay exams often give rise to “mechanical response patterns,” the five-paragraph theme and the like: “The standardized test conditions strip natural context from the writing, allow no collaboration or preparation, and disallow more than token revision. [. . .] Clearly, essay testing is a compromise and its limits must be seen clearly” (White 1995, 36). One such limit for us, apart from the writing context, was the assessment context. During the year before we changed our process, essays were not assessed by Huot’s “experts”—those who actually taught the courses into which students were placed. Rather, the newly appointed writing center director wrote the topics, administered the exam, and, with the help of two adjuncts, assessed the essays and made the placements. At that time she taught neither 100 nor 101. Our process could not have been more decontextualized, except in those odd cases where a student learned from her senior audit that she needed the TCW in order to graduate. In such cases our placement exam became the most perfunctory of exit exams.

In the face of this writing-as-product assessment practice, we found ourselves asking, like the Writing Program staff at SUNY at Stony Brook, “Why weren’t we practicing in placement what we so ardently advocated in our classrooms and courses?” (Robertson 57). How did our placement procedure relate to the freshmen writing course itself?

Although we were using a direct method of assessment, we did not have carefully developed scoring criteria, nor were full-time faculty involved in either the placement process or the basic writing program. Despite the fact that essay exams were widely accepted by our colleagues across the country (Huot 1994, 54), we felt that a radical change was in order.

## **Program Overhaul**

Then, as now, first-year composition at Fisher cohered across all sections in terms of pedagogy and goals. While instructors were and still are free to choose course content, the pedagogical approach and goals remain constant: we teach writing as a recursive process, engage in close reading of professional and student texts, focus on invention and discovery, provide ample opportunity for the workshopping and revision of essays, and use portfolios to assess end-of-semester skills. Our new placement procedure would need to incorporate and reflect those values.

To support these evolving pedagogical goals, the department made two interrelated changes: first, we eliminated the TCW and devised a new method for placing students; second, we eliminated English 100 and converted English 101 into a variable-credit course (to be taken for 3 or 4 credits). We eliminated the remedial course because English department faculty felt that the course's disadvantages were outweighing its advantages. Beverly L. Clark and Roger D. Clark suggest that even when placement methods are, as in their case at Wheaton College, "decent [. . .] predictors of exemptibility," departments must consider possible negative effects of placement procedures on some students (21). Such effects were evident among our students: we found that those first-year students placed into English 100 felt stigmatized, "held back," and this was especially clear to those of us who found them, bitter and demoralized, in our English 101 classes the following semester. Unfortunately, by placing students in a remedial course which also took them out of curricular synch with their peers, we were inadvertently reinforcing the students' misconception that people are "born" writers, when in fact what we wanted our students to learn is that all writers, even professionals, can improve their skills through instruction, practice, feedback, and revision.

In both the three- and four-credit components of English 101, students are deeply immersed in just such a recursive process of writing. The difference between the two components of the course is one of degree: fourth credit students receive additional feedback and instruction during a minimum of weekly half-hour tutorials in the writing center. Students meet with peer tutors, all of whom have taken a credit-bearing course taught by the WPA. In addition, fourth credit students meet with their

composition instructors for a minimum of two conferences over the course of the semester in order to discuss their progress in the course as well as any individual areas of concern. While the fourth credit is attached to the composition course, a student may bring in writing tasks from any of his or her linked Learning Community courses. It is the English instructor, however, who conferences with the student, receives copies of tutorial records, and assigns a grade for the fourth credit.

### **The Writing Assessment Project**

*Creating the Assignment.* The current placement process, which we instituted in Spring 1994, begins in the classroom, since all students are enrolled in English 101. All entering first-year students are required to participate in a Learning Community, all of which have an English 101 component. Despite the different topics of the Learning Communities, all first-year students are given a common reading and writing assignment. During the summer, a reading is chosen by an ad hoc committee of English department faculty under the leadership of the WPA. Since we have institutional goals for the Learning Communities, a reading is chosen that is in keeping with those goals and, to the best of our ability, the theme for that year's matriculation ceremony. Once faculty have agreed on a reading, the WPA drafts a common writing assignment, complete with writing prompts to help build prewriting into the students' processes. Then, the other members of the committee make revisions to the placement assignment, and this process continues until consensus about the final form is reached. During the first week of the three-week placement process, the students will receive the collaboratively-written assignment as well as criteria for assessment of their essays.

Our placement assignments call for a blend of personal narrative set within a larger framework of cultural analysis of a particular professional essay, thereby combining the conceptual fluency and creativity of expressivism with the critical acuity basic to constructivist college work. The essay that students finally submit is primarily personal narrative and secondarily argument: students argue that their experience demonstrates or conflicts with a particular aspect of American culture. The essays are typically three pages long and often follow the basic five-paragraph formula with which most high school students are familiar (one of the goals of English 101 is to move students beyond the five-paragraph model).

We ask our students to synthesize an argument that looks inward at the self while also looking beyond it to those external forces which impinge on the self and its evolution within society. We ask students to engage in these two kinds of reflection for several reasons. First, writing about themselves, a topic about which they are experts, allows students

(in most cases) to easily generate a lot of raw material, thereby making invention relatively easy. Because most college writing is not expressivist, we next ask them to think about the culture in which they've been immersed throughout their lives; this helps move students away from solipsistic narratives while at the same time requiring them to analyze ways in which they are shaped by and in turn shape culture. Experience has taught us that most of our students are downright Emersonian in their sense of their own individuality: they insist that, like Jay Gatsby, they've sprung from their own Platonic conceptions. Thus we come to our final reason for the style of our placement assignment, and it is, admittedly, an ideological one. We believe that a liberal arts education should make students more self-aware, especially about the hegemonic forces of our culture; however, such an awareness comes via an arduous process for many students because their sense of self-creation is so deeply felt. Our placement essay aims to jump-start the process.

*Implementation.* Placement begins in the classroom as the students use in-class brainstorming techniques. They then engage in peer review work on drafts which they then revise and submit for assessment. Throughout the process, instructors direct students toward more self-conscious writing through several in- and out-of-class writing exercises related to the paper. Thus, by the time the paper is turned in for evaluation in the third week of class, the student has engaged in a variety of activities—discussion, drafting, revising—that increase his or her investment in the paper, and the paper is likely to represent the student's best effort.

*A Sample Assignment.* One of our most richly contextualized projects took place when we used the essay, "So How Did I Get Here?" by Rosemary Bray, a Harvard-educated African-American whose story debunks myths of the welfare family. We chose this particular essay not only for its rhetorical effectiveness, accessibility, and synthesis of personal narrative and cultural analysis, but largely for the force and clarity of its argument. The essay's emphasis tied in well with our college's mission. The majority of our students are from suburban and rural, primarily white, communities; students of color represent only about twelve percent of our undergraduate population. In the face of this disparity, an ad hoc committee of students and faculty developed "The Fisher Creed" which emphasizes the value of diversity and respect for others of all backgrounds, not merely one's own. During our matriculation ceremony, all first-year students are invited to sign their names to a copy of this secular creed.

Each year's ceremony also highlights a local personality, and during this particular year, our speaker was a former anchorwoman for a local television news program. She spoke compellingly to our students about her journey from college to network television, and, finally, to the business world, as the owner of a consulting agency. A few days later, when they'd started English 101, the students were asked to write about their own journeys to Fisher, their own "So How Did I Get Here?" narratives. And while we received a number of lackluster chronological accounts, we also received many reflective essays that looked simultaneously inward at the self and outward at the culture.

Because we allow three weeks for the placement process, there was plenty of time to discuss the speaker's address, the Bray reading, and the students' own experiences and ideas. By bringing together the substance of the matriculation ceremony, the professional reading, and the students' own experiences, we managed to create a complex context in which students could begin to develop their voices, increase their level of discourse, and submit a placement essay that reflected their ability to write under "real" circumstances, rather than the artificial circumstances of the timed impromptu, on which we had for so many years relied.

## **The Placement Process**

*Developing An Anchor Set.* The WPA, along with one or two colleagues, reads the first sets of papers that come in, since sets are submitted to instructors on different days, depending on course schedules. The anchor set committee reads through these and agrees on two of each: a "3"; a "4" (meaning 3- and 4-credit placements); and a "borderline." We try to choose essays that are not the most obvious examples of their kind, since our readers are quite seasoned at this point. We think it is more important to locate areas of non-consensus so that we can engage in discussion about what "good" writing is for this particular cohort of students writing on this particular topic. These essays comprise our anchor set, which we copy without the students' names for all of our readers. From this set we develop the criteria for the current year's placement.

Although the basic criteria stay the same from year to year (the essay should demonstrate the writer's comprehension of the topic, ability to focus and develop ideas as well as to balance narrative and analysis, and mastery of standard written English), we adjust the criteria to fit each year's topic. An actual essay prompt and criteria sheet based on that year's anchor set will provide clarification. Our 1999 placement was based on the Kai Erikson essay, "Trauma at Buffalo Creek," and our prompt read as follows:



## Some Background

In his analysis of the Buffalo Creek disaster, Kai Erikson makes the distinction between community and communality. While a community is based on a shared physical territory, communality refers to the emotional and interpersonal ties that people share. In other words, communality is something MORE than a place; it is the character of that place, its personality, so to speak. Erikson describes communality as “the network of relationships that make up [one’s] general human surround.”

Sometimes that network of relationships is totally bounded by community, by a shared physical territory, as it was for the people of Buffalo Creek. If we move one step further in our thinking, we can ask ourselves where we find communality. We can ask ourselves what our most powerful network might be.

### The Assignment: Where Do You Find Communality?

Choose a network of relationships that you’re enmeshed in. Ask yourself first: is it tied to a physical territory such as your neighborhood or even a “cyber” location? If it is not, then what makes that network more powerful than just geography or place?

If your most powerful network is tied to a place, then what can you say about it that gives it communality? What makes that network more than just a group of people who find themselves in the same location?

If your most significant network does not depend on a location, then why is it more important to you than networks that are formed around locations?

What follows are some writing prompts that will help you generate ideas for your essay. After your instructor has taken you through these, he or she as well as your peers will help you come to a central focus, or idea, around which to build your essay.

- A. List the five most important networks of which you are a part.
- B. Choose one of the following as your subject and then complete the following thoughts:
  1. I can describe the network of relationships that is most important to me as \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. When I hear the people in that network talk, I hear \_\_\_\_\_.
  3. I find communality in this network of relationships because \_\_\_\_\_.

- \_\_\_\_\_.
4. If everybody I know in this group disappeared, \_\_\_\_\_ would happen.
  5. Who I am has been shaped by this network of relationships in these ways: \_\_\_\_\_.
  6. I can be a part of this network no matter where I may move because \_\_\_\_\_.
  7. I cannot carry this network with me wherever I go because \_\_\_\_\_.

During the anchor session, instructor/readers were given these guidelines:

A “3” essay:

- Is well organized: focuses appropriately, stays on focus, and has a main point. (With this year’s topic, “focus” specifically means the “network” is clearly defined as something unique to this individual.)
- Contains more than minimal details/examples of what makes this network “tick.”
- Contains some analysis explaining what makes this network “tick.”
- Is relatively free of mechanical errors, or has a concentration of one or two types of errors.

A “4” essay:

- Is not well organized: doesn’t focus appropriately, stay on focus, or have a point. (With this year’s topic, failure to focus specifically means the “network” is not clearly defined as something unique to this individual.)
- Has minimal or no details/examples demonstrating what makes this network “tick.”
- Has no analysis explaining what makes this network “tick.”
- There are many instances of several different types of errors.

## The Anchor Session

Our session begins with the distribution and reading of the anchor set; each English 101 instructor (other Learning Community faculty typically are not involved in the placement process) determines a placement for each essay. Using a double-entry matrix on a flip chart, we record each reader’s placement of each paper. In this way, we can readily and

graphically see the distribution of the threes and fours (“borderline” is not allowed at this stage). Again, we are not trying to achieve consensus; however, most placements are in synch. Rather than work toward consensus, we look for placements that diverge and ask the reader why she placed in such a manner. The process is somewhat messy and can be difficult when colleagues disagree and find themselves having to defend their assessments. After all, college professors are accustomed to dispensing grades in the privacy of their classrooms and are not often (even by their own students) called upon to explain the rationale for those assessments. However, the process, as Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow argue in the case of portfolios,

puts “objective” examiners in the same room with the student’s own teacher and gets them tangled up in discussion of specific papers where the teacher may be personally involved. The system thus makes trouble. [. . .] But this is nothing but the trouble that results from putting on the table what has always been in the closet in programs that evaluate with proficiency exams or leave evaluation wholly in the hands of the individual teacher. (“State University of New York at Stony Brook Portfolio-based Evaluation Program” 12)

So what is at first uncomfortable becomes a boon as instructors find their assessment practices affirmed by their colleagues or come away with new perspectives about those practices. In addition, the anchor session is invaluable for helping new hires—both full- and part-time—to get a sense of our standards as a department. Because Fisher is a small liberal arts college that does not offer a graduate program in English, our adjuncts are often ABDs from a local university whose first-year students typically have higher SAT scores and more cultural capital in general than our students, many of whom are first-generation college students and have different strengths. We’ve found that, almost to a person, these new adjuncts tend to have inappropriate expectations for our students, so the anchor session helps new instructors early on to reflect on and refine their assessment skills. In addition, students benefit from more consistent assessment across sections. As Belanoff and Elbow note, “When the disparity of standards is locked inside solitary heads, it’s only visible to students who compare notes and to administrators looking at different teachers’ grade sheets” (“Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program” 21). Though no amount of discussion among faculty can do away with this disparity, the calibration session has the potential to decrease it significantly.

## The Readers

After the calibration session, each paper is read by two instructors. Each instructor takes her or his own set and assesses it, putting no marks on the papers other than a “3” or a “4” on the back of the paper (comments and grades must be made later, after the assessment). Along with their revised formal drafts, students submit workshop drafts of their essays and, in some cases, process reports as well as any informal prewriting material, all of which the instructor can consult when assessing the essay. Using the essay as well as the ancillary materials mentioned above, the instructor is able to make a highly contextualized assessment. As Huot points out, such a scenario is “context-rich and rel[ies] upon raters knowing as much as possible about the papers, the students, the purpose of the evaluation, the consequences of their decisions and the decisions of fellow raters” (Huot 1996, 563). During the placement session, the second reader assesses the essay without looking at the instructor’s placement. The second reader likewise puts a “3” or “4” along with her initials. If her placement is different from that of the instructor, then adjudication by the WPA or another third reader is necessary. When instructors disagree about placement, they may discuss the placement decisions with the one or two other readers, and the placement may be changed as a result.

The WPA coordinates calibration and placement sessions, first by putting together groups so that no group contains only new hires (usually adjuncts). Before even getting to the Saturday session, faculty have explained to their students what the fourth-credit is and have told them about placement and the volunteer option. Ideally, they come with a list of volunteers. By the end of the session, the WPA has a list of those who will need additional instruction, and she knows how many slots are available for volunteers.

## The 4th Credit: Instruction In Context

In place of a remedial course, we offer supplemental credit-bearing instruction in the writing center for basic writing students. As noted, when we place, we are placing students into either a three- or four-credit version of the same course (English 101).

The fourth credit is earned through a combination of one-on-one meetings with the professor and writing work done in the writing center. In our case, the latter means work with undergraduate peer tutors, since our writing center does not employ faculty tutors (except for those who work with ESL and graduate students). We require ten half-hour visits to the writing center: the way we run the course, this amounts to two visits per paper. We also require two conferences with the instructor as

well as extra written assignments, most of which focus on increasing the student's self-awareness of his or her own writing process (writer's memos, for example). Importantly, students who are not placed in the fourth credit may volunteer to sign up for it, and we have had volunteers during every semester since we piloted this program in 1994.

Once students begin the program, they are required to complete at least one writing center session per week throughout the semester. Staggered appointments are crucial, since ten visits during the last week of the semester will not benefit students. The imposed schedule builds in time for revision and reflection of the student's own writing and writing process and avoids what Nancy Sommers identifies as a common problem among inexperienced writers, that is, the conflation of revision and editing, which is only exacerbated with the use of linear models of the composing process. Sommers writes, "The students do not have strategies for handling the whole essay. They lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers. The students view their compositions in a linear way as a series of parts" (383). This is exactly what peer tutors can help writers overcome, by asking questions which help students articulate and develop their ideas; in short, the peer tutor is a real reader. Over time, students learn to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and they often bring their own assessment criteria to later conferences.

## **Peer Tutors and Pedagogy**

Our writing center is driven by theories of active, collaborative learning, such as those put forward by Kenneth Bruffee in "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'":

[I]f we accept the premise that knowledge is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers and that learning is a social process not an individual one, then learning is not assimilating information and improving our mental eyesight. Learning is an activity in which people work collaboratively to create knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by canceling each other's biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities' interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought. (12)

Writing center peer tutors comprise one group of knowledgeable peers, a group that occupies the middle ground between everyday language and

academic discourse. Eleanor Kutz argues that teachers must “combine beginning with and validating the students’ current language, pushing the development of language and thought in meaningful contexts, and initiating students into academic discourse conventions” (390). Student tutors are just such teachers.

Peer tutors serve as mediators between students and teachers within the writing center. English 101 students bring their papers into the writing center during all stages of the writing process. For example, a peer tutor might teach a tutee brainstorming techniques, such as listing and freewriting, or the two might work on such final activities as editing or proofreading. Having already been through English 101, peer tutors can discuss with tutees their own relatively recent experience, including successes as well as setbacks. Peer tutors are particularly adept in moving between the academic literacy of college professors and the more colloquial language, both written and oral, of students. Undergraduate tutors, familiar with the conventions and lexicon of writing as a discipline, also help students to understand what their professors mean by phrases such as, “substantiate the assertions you put forth in paragraph three.” Such translation is necessary because often the very terminology that facilitates the discourse of professors is hopelessly vexing to undergraduates just entering the academic community.

Although tutorials are collaborative, we encourage writer ownership of papers in several ways. Peer tutors ask their tutees to read their papers aloud, avoid taking papers out of writers’ hands, do not write on tutees’ papers (tutors may take notes on separate sheets of paper), and teach tutees to recognize their own errors rather than making corrections for writers. In addition, peer tutors use a variety of techniques that encourage writers to think for themselves, including using handbooks to correct errors in grammar, asking questions in order to promote conceptual fluency, and teaching writers to generate and develop topics through the use of heuristics, such as tree and map diagrams as well as double entry matrices.

Peer tutors teach writing as a recursive process rather than a linear one. Sondra Perl argues that recursive writers shuttle back and forth among such writing activities as planning, generating, organizing, and editing. Perl writes:

Writers construct their discourse inasmuch as they begin with a sense of what they want to write. [. . .] Rereading or backwards movements become a way of assessing whether or not the words on the page adequately capture the original sense intended. Constructing simultaneously affords discovery. (26)

Many students do not look upon writing as a process of discovery, one that is inextricably linked to thinking and learning. Peer tutors are crucial in modeling for writers how to use what they've already written to further develop their ideas; one cannot overstate the difference it makes to students to have their peers walk them through this shuttling process.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

There are many advantages to this method of assisting students who need extra help in a basic writing course. Not only do students not feel "held back" in an extra course, but the fourth credit does not necessarily signify remediation since a variety of students take it voluntarily. Students are also placed in the fourth credit as a result of a process that takes into account all the ways writing is done in the course; group work and revision are included. Of course, disadvantages are that faculty may treat the fourth credit as something only the writing center is responsible for and not involve themselves with the students beyond assigning the hours in the writing center; this can be resolved, for the most part, with communal goal-setting sessions with all faculty at the beginning of the term.

The most important advantage to the intensive work on writing which characterizes the fourth credit is what occurs between the English 101 student and the peer tutor in the writing center. Why are sessions in a writing center more effective than a remedial course? By working with writing tutors, students are receiving one-on-one attention that no instructor, even with the best of intentions, can reasonably provide, especially in this era of increasing class sizes and administrative responsibilities. (In our English 100 classes, the typical student-teacher ratio was 15:1; however, our current 101 classes are capped at yet often exceed 20.) Writing center tutors engage students in effective conversation about writing throughout the course of an entire semester. Thus far, the fourth credit program has succeeded in helping basic writers remain in synch with their peers. Table 1 indicates both 101 grade distribution and promotion to English 102.

Table 1. Full-Time Freshman Taking the 4th Hour in ENGL 101. ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 Grades.

Fall 1995 Entering Class

	English 101 grade		English 102 grade	
	Count	%	Count	%
A	1	1.8%	2	4.0%
A-	5	9.1%	2	4.0%
B+	8	14.5%	5	10.0%
B	3	5.5%	7	14.0%
B-	8	14.5%	11	22.0%
C+	14	25.5%	10	20.0%
C	5	9.1%	5	10.0%
C-	3	5.5%	6	12.0%
D+				
D	2	3.6%		
D-	3	5.5%		
F	2	3.6%	1	2.0%
FA	1	1.8%		
W			1	2.0%

Fall 1996 Entering Class

	English 101 grade		English 102 grade	
	Count	%	Count	%
A	1	1.9%		
A-	6	11.5%	4	9.3%
B+	6	11.5%	7	16.3%
B	10	19.2%	8	18.6%
B-	5	9.6%	10	23.3%
C+	5	9.6%	2	4.7%
C	7	13.5%	6	14.0%
C-	6	11.5%	4	9.3%
D+	2	3.8%		
D	1	1.9%		
D-				
F	2	3.8%		
FA	1	1.9%		
W			2	4.7%



### Fall 1997 Entering Class

	English 101 grade		English 102 grade	
	Count	%	Count	%
A			2	3.8%
A-	11	17.2%	2	3.8%
B+	10	15.6%	6	11.5%
B	10	15.6%	6	11.5%
B-	9	14.1%	8	15.4%
C+	10	15.6%	9	17.3%
C	4	6.3%	9	17.3%
C-	4	6.3%	2	3.8%
D+	1	1.6%	2	3.8%
D	3	4.7%	1	1.9%
D-				
F			2	3.8%
FA	2	3.1%	2	3.8%
W			1	1.9%

### Fall 1998 Entering Class

	English 101 grade		English 102 grade	
	Count	%	Count	%
A	3	3.8%		
A-	5	6.3%	6	9.7%
B+	9	11.4%	5	8.1%
B	17	21.5%	12	19.4%
B-	13	16.5%	15	24.2%
C+	13	16.5%	8	12.9%
C	8	10.1%	9	14.5%
C-	3	3.8%	2	3.2%
D+	2	2.5%	1	1.6%
D				
D-				
F	4	5.1%	1	1.6%
FA	1	1.3%	2	3.2%
W	1	1.3%	1	1.6%

## Conclusion

As teachers of composition, our goal is not to remediate students in separate courses or punish them with weekly consignment to the writing center. Rather, we offer them a shared intellectual and cultural experience and exposure to peers who represent a diversity of writing strengths. For those students who need additional practice and feedback, we offer the support—in terms of both time and attention—necessary for them to succeed in their first-year writing course. We emphasize process over product, a recursive rather than linear style of thinking and

writing. We attempt to treat students as individuals who learn in a variety of ways. The fourth credit, the time spent each week in the writing center and in conferences with the instructor, allows us to teach students according to their own learning styles and to help them create their own repertoire of writing practices that will allow them to succeed as writers both during and beyond their college years.

The fourth-credit option is probably not feasible for schools with high enrollment in which the ratio of students taking writing courses to students working in the writing center is high. In a school like ours, however, a low ratio allows us to play to the strengths of a small institution. In addition, this system recognizes the fact that at a small school, a basic writing course must fulfill several functions: in addition to teaching writing, we've found ourselves acclimating students to academic life, fostering new friendships among students, and providing a forum for faculty development. In Brian Huot's words, we find our placement and subsequent instructional methods now have "institutional validity": they fit our department's and our college's mission (1994, 59). For us, process-oriented placement and follow-up instruction have worked to increase students' investment and awareness of their own writing processes, the best way we've found so far to help students become better writers.

## Works Cited

- Belanoff, Pat, and Peter Elbow. "State University of New York at Stony Brook Portfolio-based Evaluation Program." *Portfolios: Process and Product*. Ed. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 3-16.
- . "Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program." *Portfolios: Process and Product*. Ed. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 17-36.
- Bruffee, Kenneth. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana, IL.: NCTE, 1984. 3-15.
- Clark, Beverly Lyon, and Roger D. Clark. "On Placing and Misplacing Students: Some Thoughts on Exemption." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 13 (Spring 1990): 17-26.
- Erikson, Kai. "Trauma at Buffalo Creek." *Society* (Jan./Feb. 1998): 153-61.
- Grego, Rhonda, and Nancy Thompson. "Repositioning Remediation: Renegotiating Composition's Work Within the Academy." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (February 1996): 62-84.

- . “The Writing Studio Program: Reconfiguring Basic Writing/Freshman Composition.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 19 (Fall/Winter 1995): 66-79.
- Huot, Brian. “A Survey of College and University Writing Placement Practices.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 17 (Spring 1994): 49-65.
- . “Toward A New Theory of Writing Assessment.” *College Composition and Communication* 47 (December 1996): 549-67.
- Kutz, Eleanor. “Between Students’ Language and Academic Discourse: Interlanguage and Middle Ground.” *College English* 48 (1986): 385-96.
- Perl, Sondra. “A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing.” *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, Administrators*. Ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoerber. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1980. 13-32.
- Robertson, Alice. “Teach, Not Test: A Look at a New Writing Placement Procedure.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 18.1-2 (Fall/Winter 1994): 56-63.
- Royer, Daniel J., and Roger Gilles. “Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation.” *College Composition and Communication* 50 (September 1998): 54-70.
- Soliday, Mary. “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation.” *College Composition and Communication* 47 (February 1996): 85-100.
- Sommers, Nancy. “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” *College Composition and Communication*. 31 (1980): 378-88.
- White, Edward M. “An Apologia for the Timed Impromptu Essay Test.” *College Composition and Communication* 46.1 (February 1995): 30-45.
- . *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 1989.

