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Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles

Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation

No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. *The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*

—William James (27)

Dan stands at the front of a buzzing lecture hall, a yellow trifold brochure in hand, watching about a sixth of next year's 2400 "seats" find a seat. New students are seats; that's the kind of talk one hears as director of composition at a university that breaks its own enrollment record every year, doubling in size to nearly 16,000 students over the last decade. What Dan has to say to these 400 new seats invites an interesting irony: the administrators love what he's about to say precisely because they think of students as "seats," while Dan is eager to talk because, in Deweyan fashion, he is eager to upset the prevailing student/teacher power relations by presenting the students with an authentic educative choice.

The buzzing subsides, and after brief speeches by the Dean of Students and a counselor from the Financial Aid office, Dan steps forward, holding up the yellow brochure, and introduces himself as the director of composition. "In the next few minutes I'm going to ask you to make the first of

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many important choices you'll make as a student at this university—so please listen carefully.

"The Admissions people have placed a yellow trifold brochure, like this one, in your folder. Let's take a look at it. It says on the front, *English 098 or 150: Which Course is Right for You?* Before you register for classes this afternoon, you'll need to select one of these two courses to begin with as you begin your freshman year.

"Before I get to the specifics, let me explain why it is we want you to make this decision and why we aren't going to make it for you. At many schools, in fact at this school until very recently, people like me 'place' you into a writing course by looking at your ACT or SAT score, your high-school GPA, and perhaps by having you step into another room and return to us two hours later with a 'sample' of your writing. But it turns out that this is not a very valid or reliable way to find out which first-year writing course is best for you. Writing ability, at least as we conceive of it, is far too complex to measure so quickly and easily.

"The fact is, we just don't know very much about you as writers. Perhaps the *best* way to measure your writing ability would be for us to sit down with each one of you for an hour or so and talk with you about writing. If I had an hour with each of you, I'd ask you to show me samples of your best writing from high school. I'd ask you to describe your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. I'd ask you to tell me how much you read, and how well you read. If your GPA or standardized test-score didn't look too impressive, I'd ask you if anything much has changed in your image of yourself or in your habits as a student since you started your last year of high school. I know that many students arrive as college freshmen very different people—and become very different students—from what they were just a few months earlier. Some of you here today must know what I mean.

"I'd ask you how motivated you are. I'd ask you how much you like to write. I'd ask you how well you type. I'd ask you many things. I think you get my point: to find out which first-year writing course is really right for you, I would need to know more than a single test score, and I'd need to see more than a single sample of how you write under pressure or even a portfolio of your high school writing—which has probably gotten pretty stale over the summer.

"Instead, I'm going to ask you to make a responsible choice about which course to take. The question you face is: Should I take English 098 or English 150? Let me explain the difference. English 098 is a preparatory course that helps you write more confidently and purposefully, and it helps you develop ways to clarify and edit your writing for a college-level audience. You will get a letter grade in English 098, and it figures into your

GPA, but it doesn't count as one of the 120 credits you need to graduate. English 150, on the other hand, is a four-credit course that prepares you for the variety of writing experiences you will have as a university student in the coming years. The focus is on source-based writing in a variety of genres. All students must eventually get a C or better in English 150 in order to satisfy the freshman composition requirement. The decision you face is whether to go ahead and begin with English 150, or to take a two-semester sequence by starting with English 098 in the first semester and taking English 150 the second.

"Before you make up your mind too quickly, hear me out. Many schools offer a two-semester sequence of first-year writing anyway, so don't feel that you are going to get behind if you begin with 098. You don't want to enroll in 098 if 150 is best for you, and you don't want to enroll in 150 if 098 is best for you. The university has no interest in making you start with either course—that's why *you* are deciding. What we do have an interest in is your success as a student. There is no advantage to beginning with English 150 if you fail or struggle in the course because it's not the right course for you. People do fail that course, and you don't want that to happen to you.

"Generally speaking, you are well prepared for English 150 if you have done quite a bit of reading and writing in high school. English 150 instructors will assume that you can summarize and analyze published material from magazines, newspapers, books, and scholarly journals. They will also assume that you have written a variety of essays in a variety of forms, including narrative, descriptive, and persuasive writing. Look at the checklist on the center panel inside the brochure. These are some of the characteristics that we faculty look for in solid writing students. Do any of these statements describe you?

I read newspapers and magazines regularly.

In the past year, I have read books for my own enjoyment.

In high school, I wrote several essays per year.

My high school GPA placed me in the top third of my class.

I have used computers for drafting and revising essays.

My ACT-English score was above 20.

I consider myself a good reader and writer.

"Perhaps you do see yourself in at least some of those statements. If many of the statements don't describe you or if you just don't consider yourself a strong reader and writer, you might consider taking English 098. In 098 you will focus on writing in specific ways to reach specific audiences. You will write a lot in order to develop comfort and fluency. You will get lots of practice, including many hours with our Writing Center tu-

tors, and you will work on understanding the conventions of standard written English—spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage. Let’s look at the list of general characteristics that may indicate that English 098 is best for you.

Generally I don’t read when I don’t have to.

In high school, I did not do much writing.

My high school GPA was about average.

I’m unsure about the rules of writing—commas, apostrophes, and so forth.

I’ve used computers, but not often for writing and revising.

My ACT-English score was below 20.

I don’t think of myself as a strong writer.

“In English 098 you will read successful samples of essays written by professionals and by other students. In a typical class, you will complete five or six short essays—two or three pages each. You may cite some of the essays you have read or people you have interviewed, but generally you will not write research-based essays. Indeed, the purpose of English 098 is to give you the confidence, organization, and command necessary to write the research-based essays demanded in English 150 and beyond. English 098 will get you ready to do well in English 150 the next semester.

“Many of you will see statements that describe you in both lists. Others may clearly see that one or the other course is the right one to begin with. If after thinking about it you still can’t decide, I’ll be glad to talk with you—even to spend an hour and look at some of your writing as I talked about a minute ago—but I think most of you can make the right choice on your own. You all have advisers, and they can help you as well. You’ll be meeting with them later today.

“I said before that we don’t know much about you. About all I *do* know is that before you earn a ‘C’ or better in English 150, you’ll become a pretty solid college writer. Today you simply have to decide if that will take you one semester or two.

“You may be wondering if you can squeeze your way through English 150 if you aren’t really ready for it. Probably not. We use a portfolio-based grading system that requires each student to submit a folder of final work that is graded by a total of three faculty members from a larger group of English 150 teachers who have met all semester to discuss their own and our university’s expectations about college writing. Your final portfolio accounts for the majority of your final course grade, and because we ‘team grade,’ we’re confident that an ‘A’ in one class matches up pretty well with an ‘A’ in another. Our grading system is described in more detail in the brochure. For now, I just want you to realize that your decision today

should not be taken lightly. You really do have to write well in order to move beyond English 150.

"There's other important information in this brochure. Look at the back page under the heading, 'What to Expect the First Day.' Go ahead and read those paragraphs while you listen to me talk for another minute or so. Notice that in both 098 and 150, on the first day of class your teacher will ask you to write a brief essay. Your teacher will read the essay as a simple indication of your writing abilities and let you know what he or she thinks. During this first week of class, you will have the opportunity to switch from one class to the other if you wish. But remember, the decision is yours, not your teacher's. Note too that the brochure includes information about the Writing Center, the Library Skills program, our junior-level writing requirement, and our Writing Across the Curriculum program. We value writing a lot, and in your time as a student here you'll be doing quite a bit of it, so we want you to be as ready as you can be.

"English 098 and 150 are both very good courses. English 150 is a course you will share in common with every freshman. You will all take it. And many of our very best instructors teach English 098. Believe me, we will have many full sections of 098 and every student in that class with you, if that's the one you take, will be there because he or she chose to take it. Nobody will be in 098 against their will, and for this reason many students find the atmosphere there encouraging and helpful. For many, it is a way to brush up, get some practice, and prepare themselves for the challenge of English 150.

"Finally, before I leave, I'd like to see a show of hands, not to indicate which course you will take, but to indicate whether or not you have made a choice. OK. If you're still not sure which course you should enroll in, please talk with me or your adviser later today. Thanks for your time, and I wish you all the best of luck."

Why Directed Self-Placement?

During the summer of 1996, either Dan or Roger, the previous composition director, gave a version of this ten-minute speech to five other groups—and in the end over 22% of the students placed themselves into ENG 098. What compels 500 students to place themselves in a course that doesn't count as college credit? Are these the same students that we would have placed in ENG 098 had we used our old method of ACT-English score plus writing sample? We don't yet fully know the answers to these questions, but after our second full year of using what we're calling "directed self-placement," we feel that we've found a placement method that works very well for all of us—teachers, students, and administrators alike.

Our decision to give directed self-placement a try originated with widespread frustration over our traditional placement method. We knew of the well-documented limitations of placement tests—the artificiality of direct writing and the questionable reliability and validity of traditional direct assessment (see, for instance, Elbow). And we'd never liked using ACT-English scores, but we'd resorted to them as a preliminary screen when our freshman-orientation groups got so big we had trouble scoring all the essays in the brief turnaround time available to us. The Admissions people who ran orientation didn't like our method much, either; they had to schedule an hour for writing, then wait for the results before they could help the students register.

Our ENG 098 students weren't very fond of the system, either. They started the class with a chip on their shoulder after having been told during orientation that, despite their "B" average in high school, they were *required* to take a no-credit English class. We surveyed our students in the Fall of 1995 and found that only 38% of the ENG 098 students felt they were properly placed in the course. There were quite a few negative comments about both the placement procedure and the course itself.

Finally, the teachers themselves were frustrated. Not only did they have to deal with unhappy students, but they also had to replicate the placement essay during the first week of classes and shift students to the appropriate course, often against the students' will. By January of 1996, it became clear that we were kidding ourselves if we believed that these "supposed necessities" were fair to anyone involved. We decided to rethink our approach.

We first considered trying to improve traditional placement-test procedures. Schools such as the University of Pittsburgh and Washington State have "contextualized" placement decisions by shifting their focus from how student writing matches up against general and fixed criteria to how it fits with the actual curriculum (Huot 553-54). In other words, they place students into *courses* rather than into categories. This alternative does involve some looking away from what William James would call "first things, principles, and 'categories,'" but it seemed to us not to make the full pragmatic turn toward "last things, fruits, consequences, facts." Indeed, we had already been using a version of this method to place our students. But we realized that no matter how site-specific and contextualized we made our reading of placement essays, we might side-step some reliability concerns and finesse our notion of validity, but we would inevitably wind up making decisions based on the inadequate data of a single writing sample. We were beginning to feel that our old placement engine could not, once again, be retuned or rebuilt.

We toyed with the idea of entrance portfolios—which would move us beyond the single piece of writing—but the Admissions directors balked.

"This isn't Stanford," they told us. "If we make students put together an entrance portfolio and the next school doesn't, the students will simply pick the next school." Besides, we knew that asking for entrance portfolios would place quite a burden on our already overburdened summer faculty. How would we read over two thousand portfolios? And even if we could do this, we would still be mired in the interrater-reliability fix, even if it was transformed into a question of reliability among those rater/teachers who would be teaching the course. The only real way around this last problem would be to insure that raters taught just those students whose portfolios they assessed, and this would be impossible in the context we faced.

We were stuck. In the meantime, at our administration's prompting, our "institutional analyst" evaluated the placement data and composition grades over the past several years. His conclusion was bleak: statistically speaking, neither of our two placement devices bore much relationship to student success in composition classes, if "success" could be defined as earning credit for the course (earning a "C" or better). High ACT scores did correlate somewhat with *high* grades in our ENG 150 course, but students on all levels of the ACT appeared to have about the same chance of getting a "C" or better. From an administrative point of view, we couldn't very well keep students out of a course they could earn a "B-" or "C+" in.

Of more concern to us within the writing program was the fact that fully one-fifth of our ENG 150 students were either withdrawing or earning below a "C"—that is, failing to earn credit for the course—but according to our analyst these students did not show any particular ACT-score tendencies. That is, ACT scores alone could not predict who would fail or struggle in ENG 150.

Our placement-essay system didn't fare much better, according to the analyst. Over the past few years, enough students had either not taken a placement test or simply ignored our placement decision that he could conclude again that not much relationship existed between "placement" and "success" in composition classes. Students who'd been placed into ENG 150, students who'd skipped the placement test, and even students who'd been placed into ENG 098 but taken ENG 150 instead all had about the same chance of earning credit in our ENG 150 course.

From the students' point of view, they had little to lose in giving ENG 150 a try, for ACT score or placement-essay results had very little predictive value. Statistically, about 80% of them—regardless of test scores—would get a "C" or better. Finally, at a meeting between upper-administration and writing-program administrators, the statistician remarked that, given all the time, effort, and money we put into placing students in composition courses, a random placement would make as much sense and that we might just as well let the students place themselves. At first we chuckled. Then we looked again at our options. In the end, we decided to take the man seriously.

Our statistician had lifted a veil from before our eyes: all of our efforts had been directed toward finding a better way for *us* to place our students—for us to assess our students' writing abilities quickly and effectively, preferably in an hour or two. Before this nudge from the statistician, we lacked what Peter Elbow calls the "utopian or visionary impulse," which kept us "blinded by what seems normal" (83). Normally, the placement universe revolves around teachers; we choose the methods, we score the essays, we tell students what courses to take. Now we began to envision students at the center, and for the first time we turned our attention to the people who knew our students best: the students themselves.

We have not regretted our decision. Our ENG 098 "placement rate" has dropped from 33% to 22%, but for the first time we feel that the right students are taking our developmental writing class. All in all, we believe there are several good reasons to adopt directed self-placement.

Directed Self-Placement Feels Right

Directed self-placement possesses what computer programmers call elegance, what philosophers might call the shine of Ockham's razor. It has a pleasing feel about it with influence stretching in every direction: from a simple brochure at the hub, its vectors point to students, local high schools, teachers, and administrators. Its simplicity recommends it over the unreliability of test scores. Its honesty calls out to students and lures them in the right direction. Its focus is on the future and each student's self-determined advance. This alternative placement strategy is a consummate movement toward what Patricia Mann terms "familial unmooring," a concept that Grego and Thompson use to urge compositionists and their academic institutions to break nostalgia's hold on students and their writing and enable students to "remember themselves as whole people (not just a number or a grade)" (74). In this manner, directed self-placement involves the restoration of interpersonal agency—but not without some cost. Grego and Thompson remind us:

Nostalgic views of student writing would rather hold on to ways of assessing and teaching students writing which make the institution's job predictable and containable, neat and tidy. To do otherwise is to get pretty messy, to engage in the struggle to make sense of the complexities of student writing not "organized" by the traditional assessments and curriculum of a particular academic site. (75)

And it's not just students who are encouraged to change. Directed self-placement is an attitude, James' pragmatic attitude. We feel very differently about our jobs, about students, and about writing after our ten-minute

speech, much differently from the way we felt after several hours of reading placement essays. Our old concerns about validity and reliability are now replaced with something akin to “rightness.” And the rightness of the choice now lies with the student, where we feel it belongs.

We surveyed our Fall 1996 students, and they told an altogether different story from the previous group. Their written comments repeatedly stressed that when the two courses were explained to them at orientation, the students who chose ENG 098 simply felt that it was the course for them. Because of their past experiences with writing, they felt they needed to “brush up” before tackling ENG 150. Interestingly, the reasons students cited most frequently for choosing ENG 098 centered on behavior and self-image—not test scores or grades. Our ENG 098 students saw *themselves* as poor readers and writers. In the past, we had done the seeing for them.

We asked students to tell us which of the seven potential indicators most strongly influenced them to take ENG 098. These were the indicators that we faculty had designed as we thought about our own composition classes. The indicators reveal what we saw, and continue to see, as the main prerequisites for success in our first-year composition program: solid reading habits, writing confidence, familiarity with the mechanical aspects of writing, and experience with computers. They are analogous to the “contextualized” placement practices that Huot cites (553-54), but instead of measuring sample student writing against our contextualized expectations, we have asked the students to measure their own perceptions of themselves against our expectations. We added ACT scores and high-school grades to our list primarily as a possible anchor for students not used to assessing their abilities qualitatively.

We were pleasantly surprised by what we found. Of the 230 responses, barely a quarter cited test scores and grades:

1. 24% said “Generally I don’t read when I don’t have to.”
2. 23% said “I don’t think of myself as a strong writer.”
3. 15% said “My ACT-English score was below 20.”
4. 12% said “My high school GPA was about average.”
5. 12% said “I’m unsure about the rules of writing.”
6. 9% said “In high school, I did not do much writing.”
7. 6% said “I’ve used computers, but not often for writing and revising.”

Notice that items 1, 2, and 5 (59%) reflect self-image and self-assessment, items 3 and 4 (27%) reflect external judgments, and items 6 and 7 (15%) reflect high-school or other past educational experience. It seems right to us that our students are selecting ENG 098 because of their own view of themselves. And indeed, we hope that the course will help them change that view and give them confidence as they move on in the curriculum.

In retrospect, we believe that our discomfort with traditional placement methods arose from a uneasy feeling of impropriety. In the space of an hour or two, we had been trying to make a major decision for hundreds of students. At ten o'clock we didn't know their names, but by noon we "knew" what first-semester course they should take. No matter how careful we tried to be, we felt that any decision would be hasty. The "emergent" placement procedures cited by Huot, which view placement either as "a teaching decision" or as "a screening process," share an assumption that simply doesn't sit well with us—that whatever decision made is to be made by teachers, not students (556).

But what of reliability? Obviously two of the items listed in our brochure, ACT-English scores and high-school GPA, are extremely "reliable" data, even if they are problematic measures of writing ability per se. But we have come to view the other indicators as very reliable as well. First, there is no "interrater-reliability" problem since there is only one rater. More importantly, a student is unlikely to respond to a statement like "I don't read when I don't have to" differently from one week to the next. Leaving aside for a moment the question of validity, we are convinced that student responses to our brochure prompts are very reliable—more reliable, we believe, than summer faculty's holistic responses to anonymous and impromptu student writing.

Directed Self-Placement Works

What does it mean to say that directed self-placement works? First, we might admit failure if *no one* chose our developmental writing course, although even then we might chalk it up as a victory for mainstreaming first-year writing students. Along with those who, with some important cautions, advocate mainstreaming (Elbow and Soliday), we 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. Indeed, conventional notions of "remediation" may not apply to students who in effect *ask* for the extra course. Elbow anticipates this development when he concedes that some students may "*want* to be held apart in a separate and protected situation . . . , so perhaps it would make sense to have a conventional basic writing course for those who want it. But let us ask them and give them a choice instead of deciding for them" (93).

In practice, we observe that many students decide for themselves that they need a basic or conventional writing course, "a sheltered educational pocket" (Soliday 85). For us, reconceiving remediation begins by taking student choice seriously—that is, to heed Elbow's wise concession. Our 22% placement rate has held steady for two years, so we feel that we are

reaching a significant population of students. In a sense, our new placement method “works” no matter how many students choose ENG 098; we simply want to make the course available to those who want or need it.

We also might say that self-placement works if it manages to locate the same group of ENG 098 students that our more traditional (and labor-intensive) methods located. In 1995, our method was to screen with ACT-English scores and then to look at a timed writing sample. In 1996 and 1997 we used directed self-placement. We compared two of the most easily measured characteristics of the two populations and found that the groups shared very similar high-school GPAs (just under 3.0, compared to our freshman class’s overall average of just over 3.2) and ACT-English scores (17.8 in 1995, 18.6 in 1996 and 1997, compared to our overall average of 22). This suggests that the students took their high-school GPAs and ACT-English scores into account: we didn’t need to do it for them. So as a “replacement” of the old system, directed self-placement worked, though as we have begun to discover, there may be good reasons to dismiss these general indicators of academic ability as unable to predict success in writing courses.

We also looked at grades in ENG 098 and ENG 150. The overall GPA in ENG 098 was significantly lower in 1996 (2.56) than it was in 1995 (2.90), but then it jumped back up to 2.82 in 1997. We hesitate to conclude too much from these three years, but one possible explanation for the general drop in GPA in ENG 098 is that directed self-placement did a better job of locating genuinely struggling writers—that is, the very writers we hope to assist in ENG 098—within the larger group with below-average ACT scores and high-school GPAs. On the other hand, perhaps our grading has simply fluctuated.

If our overall goal is to help students succeed in ENG 150 (so that they can go on and succeed in other classes and in their careers), then perhaps it’s too early to say whether our directed self-placement system really works. We do know that about 66% of our 1995 ENG 098 students went on to earn credit for ENG 150 by the end of the next semester, while just 55% of the 1996 group did the same. The difference seemed to be that while in 1995 about 87% of the ENG 098 students went on to take ENG 150 the next semester, in 1996 only 75% of our ENG 098 students took ENG 150 the next semester. There could be several reasons for this, and we’re still looking into it. Did they drop out of school? Did they feel overwhelmed by writing and choose to stay away from the next course? Or did they feel well-prepared for their other classes and simply decide to delay ENG 150 until a more convenient time?

Even with questions like these unanswered, we are convinced that directed self-placement is working at our school. We continue to locate hundreds of students each year that feel they need additional help with their writing, and we do it very efficiently and on terms the students understand and appreciate.

Directed Self-Placement Pleases Everyone Involved

To analyze numbers is, to some extent, to fall back into the thinking that what's most important about placing students in developmental or regular first-year writing courses is a quantifiable assessment of their writing ability. Teachers assess students' ability at the end of every term, but placement ought to be a student's own choice. Traditional placement procedures, as well as those procedures that Huot calls "emergent writing assessment" (556), assume that students don't know enough about what lies before them to make an intelligent choice. Or perhaps they cynically hold that students don't want to make wise choices and that they want to take as few writing courses as possible. We are careful to address the former assumption with our talk and our brochure. We address the latter concern by assuming ourselves that students will live, for better or for worse, with the choices they make, and by teaching each class at the level described in our brochure and course catalog.

Huot indicates that notions of assessment validity are evolving. Beyond measuring what they purport to measure, valid assessment procedures "must have positive impact and consequences for the teaching and learning of writing" (551). We tell students that their education—and this first decision about ENG 098 or ENG 150—is their responsibility. We can offer direction, we can outline the purposes and expectations of each course, but we simply can't make the decision as intelligently as they can. It pleases students to know that they are in charge of their learning. It may be the most important message they receive at freshman orientation. It also puts some pressure on them—pressure that rightly belongs to them. When we place students, we take away from them a critical component in their educational lives. If we choose for them, they may think that the right thing is being done, but it is understandable that many take our choosing for them as an excuse to become either angry or defeated. The sense of rightness comes to students who make their own decisions in a matter like this and when they vow to affirm through hard work that the right decision has been made.

Students who appraise their ability too highly have a challenge before them. On the other hand, students who believe that ENG 098 is the best course for them are happy to have the opportunity to improve themselves and pleased to possess the dignity of making such a choice for themselves.

To illustrate this, we'll describe the experiences of two students—not to prove that directed self-placement works in the same way for everyone, but to show how it *can* work for individual students.

Kristen and Jacob were both traditional freshmen, a month or two past their 1997 high-school graduation ceremonies, when they attended summer orientation and selected their first composition courses. Based on sheer numbers (3.68 high-school GPA, ranked in the top 12% of her class,

ACT-English score of 19), we might have expected Kristen to place herself into ENG 150, but she selected ENG 098. And we might have expected Jacob (3.16 high-school GPA, ranked in the top 46% of his class, ACT-English score of 15) to place himself into ENG 098, but he selected ENG 150.

What went into their decisions? Kristen, who made her decision while looking over the two lists of “characteristics” in the brochure, felt unsure of her ability to step right into college-level writing. “I was just being cautious,” she says now. “I was just starting college and didn’t know what to expect. I figured that English 098 would get me back into the writing mode. I’d been out of school all summer.” Kristen’s parents supported her decision, but she told them about it afterwards, after she’d already registered. “I made the decision during orientation,” she recalls. “I was on my own.”

Jacob, on the other hand, sought advice from others before making his final decision. He registered for ENG 150 during orientation, but then he spoke with his parents and high-school English teacher over the next several days. “When I was back home after orientation, I gave my advanced-comp teacher a call and read the class description of both classes, and both she and I decided that 150 was a good choice.” His parents, though, disagreed. “My parents wanted me to take 098 because they didn’t want me to screw up my first semester. But I wanted to take 150 to show them I wouldn’t screw up.”

Both Kristen’s caution and Jacob’s determination seem to us excellent reasons for selecting the courses they chose. Kristen did well in ENG 098 (she earned a B+) and enjoyed the class. “It was flexible, and everyone wrote at their own pace. It was not very stressful. We mostly wrote on things that interested us.” She also says that she improved her writing: “We went to a tutor once a week. During the semester, I learned that there are different ways to write a paper. There are different emotions and audiences that a person must consider. You must also deal with many drafts before a final draft. You have to make enough time to get everything done.”

Now that she is in ENG 150, Kristen feels well-prepared and well-situated as a college writer. “ENG 150 is more of an ‘on-your-own’ class. We use computers, and we do a lot of reading and research. Overall, I think I’m doing pretty well.”

Jacob also looks back on his decision as a good one. He says that he took the decision very seriously—more seriously than he might have back in high school: “In high school you’re just taking classes, but in college you’ve got money involved.” Like Kristen, he feels that he learned a lot in the course. “My final paper was a work of art compared to my high-school papers. The most important thing I gained from the class was to simply make my paper flow much better than I could before, not jumping from thought to thought.”

Jacob earned a “C” in ENG 150, and he feels content with the experience. “Now I feel like I’m writing at a proficient college level. In my opinion, that’s the goal of a freshman course.”

In the responses of these students, we see a welcome shift in attitude, a merging of our goals and theirs. Where there might have been conflict, there is now cooperation. And we can say that as teachers, we adopt a very different attitude toward students who place themselves in ENG 098 or ENG 150. Teachers in ENG 098 know that the students, by their own admission, are asking for some help to get ready for college writing. No developmental writing teacher begins class with the view that the first order of business is to prove to the student that he or she was indeed placed correctly. Our best students are the ones that ask us to help them learn, and now in no other class on campus can a teacher assume with as much confidence that this is precisely what every student in the ENG 098 class wants. In fact, the ENG 098 class is becoming a favorite choice among writing faculty because of this positive attitude of orientation. This class fulfills no college requirement and doesn’t count as credit toward graduation, yet the students are there and this pleases anyone with teaching instincts.

Those of us teaching ENG 150 know that each student has accepted the challenge of the course. The students have another option, but they feel ready to begin the required first-year writing course. Although occasionally the first-day writing sample indicates there is a student or two that might be better off in ENG 098, the teacher now faces a student, not an ACT score or the evidence of a one-shot writing sample. If the student knows what is expected and accepts the challenge, who are we to tell them they can’t take this course? If a student fails ENG 150, that student must recur to his or her own self-placement, not a writing sample or the inflated high-school transcript. Teachers are pleased when the placement responsibility lies with the student, for the relationship is thus cleaner, less muddled with the interference of test scores and with predictions for success or failure from everyone *except* the student.

Finally, we have discovered that administrators are also pleased with directed self-placement. Admissions directors don’t have to help organize placement exams or explain to students why they need to begin their college career with a not-for-college-credit course. They are pleased to invite potential students to compare the way we and other schools treat their incoming students: we provide options, while other schools take them away. And of course, unlike placement exams, directed self-placement costs nothing.

Like Huot, we want a placement procedure that focuses “inward toward the needs of students, teachers, and programs rather than outward toward standardized norms or generalizable criteria” (555). With directed self-placement we’ve found a way to place the focus first and foremost on

students and their own self-understanding, capabilities, and purposes. Our teachers have been freed from an uncomfortably hasty kind of assessment so that they can focus entirely on the more authentic kinds of assessment that go on over the course of an entire semester. And the integrity of our program has benefited from the honest challenge presented by our promise to stick to our advertised course standards and objectives and to offer help and preparation to those who believe they need it.

A Pragmatist Theory of Writing Assessment

As we've indicated above, we believe that the assumptions and practices that Huot describes as "new, emergent writing assessment" are not yet deeply enough contextualized in the students' own personal and educational lives. The placement method we are advocating has its theoretical roots in John Dewey's democratic and pragmatist philosophy of education. Pragmatist understanding of experience, particularly Dewey's instrumentalism, supplies the soundest theory in support of directed self-placement. Dewey supplies us with these principles of learning: educational growth should be directed; inquiry begins in uncertainty and moves toward transformation; instrumental intelligence requires the freedom and power to choose.

Dewey says that "it is the office of the social medium," which includes schools, "to direct growth through putting powers to the best possible use" (*Democracy* 114). We direct our students' growth in part by establishing and communicating the goals of ENG 150 and the abilities required to succeed in the course. The *power* that directed self-placement taps is the desire among new college students to get started on the right foot and to finally make some personal choices about their education. Freshmen come to the university hyper-aware of their educational background, their capabilities, and the promise of success. They generally have a good sense of where they stack up in comparison to their peers. Where there is indetermination and uncertainty—uncertainty about preparation, about writing, and about one's ability to fit in to the new discourse community—there is a need for what Dewey calls transformation.

The *instrumental* function involves the way inquiry is used as a tool to intelligently direct one's experience. For Dewey, inquiry "is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" ("Pattern" 320). Instrumentalism replaces static understanding ("you are a basic writer") with an emphasis on the dynamic relation between the student and the possibilities waiting in his or her environment ("perhaps I should take a developmental writing course").

Our placement program thus relies on honest student inquiry and interactive participation. Our orientation talk offers direction: it is a critical first moment in four years of communication. We tell students where they need to end up, and they tell us how they want to get there. Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*: “The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements” (4). Our invitation to satisfy the first-year writing requirement in two semesters or one, by beginning with either ENG 098 or ENG 150, fosters the disposition characteristic of genuine learning and offers an invitation to academic community as opposed to establishing from the get-go that teachers are going to take over control of student learning.

Other theories of assessment define too narrowly what placement is all about. Edward White maintains that essay tests are “perfectly appropriate” if all we seek is “information that will help students enroll in courses for which they are ready” (33). But placement is not about *our* discovery of information; it is about getting a student’s higher education started in the best possible way. If we want to communicate to students the dispositions characteristic of all inquirers, then most decidedly an essay test is *not* perfectly appropriate. To think so is to take on the mindset of administrators, who often view students merely as “seats” in a classroom. Finding the right “seat” for a student is not enough.

A pragmatist theory of assessment situates placement with regard to each student’s aims and dispositions. 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. Dewey remarks that “aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—...cannot be passed physically from one to another like bricks” (4). What is required is communication—and every placement method communicates something important to students. Perhaps this is why traditional placement into remedial courses has not proven to equip students to succeed in the regular writing course. Perhaps those students are still waiting for someone to fix what ails them. We hope that we are encouraging in our new students, in pragmatist fashion, an intelligent way of responding to expectations and requirements.

If proper placement is a matter of guiding students into the course that is best suited to their educational background and current writing ability, directed self-placement may be the most *valid* procedure we can use. If the clarity of criteria and their consistent application is the standard of *reliability*, directed self-placement ranks high as long as we use current course goals and standards for success to inform and guide students in their choice.

Directed self-placement is no panacea. It does not address the problem of how to teach, how to bring students in from the margins, or how to deal with all of the politics of institutional change. Soliday, Grego and Thompson, Bartholomae and others address many of these concerns that would take us far beyond the limited scope of placement alternatives. But our placement alternative does lay the ground work for much that these authors recommend.

And so to conclude this essay, we return finally to a practical concern we confronted when we turned an important choice over to students—the risk. The “risk” of directed self-placement is peculiar. We imagined, for example, that, left to make the final decision on their own, no students would enroll in ENG 098. There we would be with 20 empty sections. If this were to happen, who would we blame? How bad would it really be? Who would be hurt? The peculiar feature of directed self-placement is that, in one sense, it can’t really fail. If nobody took our developmental writing class, it would be a choice that each student made with his or her eyes open; our brochure and our orientation talk would make sure of that much. And if ill-prepared students take ENG 150, the teacher’s complaint about unprepared students would have to be directed back toward the students. If they pass the course, who can blame them for taking the chance? 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.

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