

Writing Placement That Supports Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the development of a curriculum-based, expert-reader placement system called Placement and Teaching Together (PTT). The essay presents data and analysis of the PTT system as implemented and evaluated at one university for three years. In contrast to other placement methods such as standardized tests or Directed Self-Placement (DSP), PTT combines placement, teaching, and direct assessment of student writing by integrating the placement instrument into regular semester coursework and requiring students to produce writing similar to that expected in first-year writing classes. Including discussion of PTT's shortcomings and strengths (from teacher, student, and administrator perspectives), the study is rooted in analysis of several surveys, grade data, and other administrative documents, a review of the literature on writing placement with particular comparison to DSP, and self-reflection by the primary administrators of this approach to writing assessment.

Placing students in appropriate first-year writing classes has long been an issue for writing programs and their students, and recent years have seen at least three major trends which have created new challenges and possibilities for first-year writing placement.¹ From outside the field we see the rising relevance of the national testing establishment which offers tests that are designed for placement, as well as admissions tests which are frequently being advocated for use as placement vehicles by budget-strapped institutions (Huot, O'Neill and Moore; Isaacs and Molloy; O'Neill, Moore and Huot; Peckham, "Online Challenge"). These tests provide increased efficiency at the cost of decreased construct representation – that is, the test instruments do not closely approximate the writing that students are asked to do in their college writing classes. From within the field we see the appealing Directed Self-Placement (DSP) movement which is exactly what

the SATs and the like are not: deliberately subjective, putting each student into the driver's seat.

With significantly less attention afforded to it, we observe a third movement that strives to return the acts of students writing and faculty reading to the enterprise of placement. Best represented by William Smith, Brian Huot, Irvin Peckham, Theresa Freda Nicolay, Richard Haswell and Susan Wyche-Smith, among others, this movement offers a curriculum-based, expert-reader approach to placement. We call our version of such an approach Placement and Teaching Together (PTT) to emphasize its connection to curriculum, its embedding of assessment within teaching, and its aligning of assessment with curriculum. Unlike DSP, this approach relies on assessment by teachers, yet it significantly improves upon traditional practices of teacher placement that use an impromptu essay and objective test in two essential ways. First, PTT asks expert readers to make judgments based on their context knowledge—their knowledge of the writing courses offered at a given university. Second, PTT requires students to do work similar to that expected in first-year writing classes: writing produced and revised outside of a testing situation, under conditions that reflect the environments in which complex writing acts emerge, and in response to readings. In short, by combining reading, writing, discussion, and other activities that are guided and reviewed by teachers, our version of PTT does not merely introduce or mimic the work expected of students in first-year writing courses, it is that work.

PTT, like DSP, is a local, affordable measure that writing faculty can turn to in response to the weaknesses of the assessments offered by the testing establishment, as dominated by the two non-profit corporations, the College Board (CB) and ACT. The College Board and ACT each offer two different kinds of assessments that are used for placement: Accuplacer (CB) and Compass (ACT) are tests that are designed for placement; the SAT in Critical Reading and Writing (CB) and the ACT test (ACT) are admissions tests that these companies have relatively recently studied and re-labeled for use in placement (ACT; College Board). While these admissions and placement tests do offer data collection and organization, and therefore the potential for accumulative analysis and national and other comparisons,² they provide little value for placement that is based on the local context and curriculum.

Nevertheless, these tests are well positioned to reach practical and fiscally-minded college administrators who are educated by a psychometrician mindset to value reliability – producing “perfectly consistent scores” (Huot and Neal 429) – almost as much as efficiency, and who may pressure writing program administrators to adopt them for placement. Indeed, adoption

of the SATs and similar assessments is popular; fully 75% of the schools Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight examine in their 2010 study of a diverse range of 4-year colleges and universities use the SAT or ACT test, or a combination of these, to determine placement in what might be called “off-label” use, that is, in ways for which the tests were never designed. These findings suggest that now even more schools are relying on teacherless, objective tests than in 1994 when Brian Huot found that half of 1100 colleges and universities surveyed were using procedures that did not include teachers reading student writing (“Survey”).

Placement by objective national tests and other measures like DSP has risen in part in response to fiscal, practical, and theoretical problems with what had been the standard for many years: the local, one-shot summer placement essay administered and scored by writing faculty. Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles in fact developed a DSP system to replace the summer placement program they ran at Grand Valley State, and of which they had grown weary and dissatisfied. Certainly, DSP is an appealing antidote to domination by educational “measurement experts” (White, “Language” 189) from outside the field of Writing Studies. DSP is not a panacea, however; not only is it impossible to implement at many institutions for practical, administrative, and theoretical reasons (Isaacs and Molloy; Peckham, “Online Challenge”), but it also has some drawbacks (as noted by Gere, Aull, Green, and Porter; Harrington; Nicolay; Neal and Huot; O’Neill, Moore and Huot; Bedore and Rossen-Knill; Lewiecki-Wilson, and Tassoni). Of particular concern to us, echoing Michael Neal and Brian Huot (250-1), is that while DSP brings students into the picture, in many implementations it also involves the practical erasure of teachers whose experience with what students do in writing classes seems of great value. In contrast, following William Smith’s Expert Reader approach at the University of Pittsburgh, PTT privileges teacher knowledge and “local discourse community calibration” (182).

In this essay we offer an approach for placement that is in the PTT model, and we share our research assessing both its effectiveness and its impact on teachers and students. Briefly, in our placement program, students in College Writing I: Intellectual Prose (CW I) and our basic writing course, Introduction to Writing (BW), have a common first assignment, developed by a faculty committee, which is sent to them over the summer (see appendix for an example). Students read several articles on an issue and draft an initial essay before classes start; they then discuss the issue with their teacher and classmates at the first meeting before producing a second draft that is submitted to instructors for feedback *and* for placement review. Then, in their regular process of teaching writing through providing com-

mentary on drafts, instructors also identify students they believe may benefit from being placed in the other course and submit these students' essays for evaluation. The placement process continues with two and, as necessary, three readings of these essays by expert readers, a placement decision, and, when students desire, an appeal process which allows for submission of additional writing and consultation with Writing Program administrators.

Our PTT approach does triple duty. On a practical level, we evaluate and place all students with few additional costs because the vast majority of assessments are completed as part of teachers' regular work of responding to student writing. More importantly, unlike traditional one-shot diagnostics, PTT enables writing instruction consistent with the field's valuing of revision and with this particular writing program's emphasis on revision. Finally, it functions as faculty development. A common writing assignment developed and tested by veteran faculty familiar with BW and CW I provides the opportunity for negotiation of core program values. Moreover, in writing programs such as ours that are large and experience significant staff turnover, this shared writing assignment and assessment experience allows transmission of these values to new teachers. In sum, by introducing students to the work of our writing courses, our placement procedure does not just place students, but it allows us to "value what we know" (Broad) and to broadcast our philosophy to our students, to new teachers in the program, and to our university community.

As we detail later, our research finds that PTT has significant merit for students and teachers, although there are also drawbacks. Broadly, teachers value this experience as authentic and valid, resulting in improved placement, though they are also concerned about disruptions to their usual procedures and to the partial loss of autonomy that this approach entails. However, student success in this program is strong, as demonstrated by grade data and several student surveys. A significant majority of students believe they were placed correctly through our approach, and even students who were provisionally placed in the standard course and then moved "down" to basic writing were favorable overall in their response. That student response is so favorable – particularly given that many of our students have been schooled by New Jersey state assessments and a culture that tends to trust the objectivity of large testing establishments like the College Board—is especially heartening.

PLACEMENT: THE NEGLECTED ASSESSMENT

Before detailing our procedure and our assessment of it, it is useful to consider the field's struggles to find appropriate and valid ways to place

students as well as our Writing Program's path to PTT. In comparison to classroom assessment (grading), program assessment, and exit assessment, placement has been of limited scholarly interest and discussion (Harrington; Huot, O'Neill, and Moore; Smith) until the recent scholarly zeal for DSP which itself has received little critical examination (Gere et al. 155). Nonetheless, as a practical matter, placement is ever present for writing program administrators and students. In 1955, William Baker surveyed the placement practices at the country's Big Ten universities and found that most used an impromptu essay and an objective writing test administered during orientation that evaluated "spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and usage" (351); he notes that "[a]lthough the survey did not indicate which method of placement (objective test or theme) was given most weight, it seems reasonable to assume that the objective test is used chiefly because the procedure for grading themes is very time-consuming and costly" (352).

The first responses to the obvious shortcomings of objective measurement via multiple-choice tests focused on two improvements: local placement and real writing. Thus, from the 70s into the 90s, colleges and universities nationwide developed local writing placement tests for orientation week. Students crowded into lecture halls with bluebooks, ready to write short impromptu essays that were evaluated by writing instructors who were normed by anchor papers and rubrics (Huot, O'Neill and Moore; Peckham, "Turning Placement"; White, "Opening"). Using double-blind readings and frequent recalibrations to ensure high inter-rater reliability, readers produced highly reliable scores in fairly short order, allowing students to register for appropriate classes before the semester began. Reflecting on the development of this program in California, Edward White reminds us of the importance of establishing local experts in writing as capable and worthy of making decisions about writing assessment:

[Doing so] meant that the large testing firms that had established dominance over writing assessment were no longer to be the only players in this high-stakes game and that the political powers that normally determined the policies and goals of education had been reduced, at least temporarily, to funding agencies for faculty managers. For once, English faculty were able to define their own work and take charge of its implementation in the political sphere. ("Opening" 309)

Critiques of mass, in-house tests capitalize on the familiar image of hundreds of newly admitted students crowding into gymnasiums to write a quick essay between an Accuplacer-directed math assessment and an ulti-

mate Frisbee party at the quad – not exactly ideal conditions for writing. But this criticism must be taken in the context of the educational testing establishment’s near stranglehold on assessment in 1971 when White and his colleagues were facing down higher education administrators, and today when we are in a similar position. Now, as then, many of us have reason to mourn for the days of five hundred students in a room writing as we face placement by nationalized, objective, multiple-choice-dominated assessments. Close to sixty years after Baker’s report, the central problems of time and money remain at the heart of the challenges that colleges and universities face as they attempt to evaluate students for best placement in writing classes. In the context of these challenges, writing faculty still need to make the case for the value of their expertise.

The popular new kid on the block featured to save us from placement via these admissions instruments is Directed Self-Placement. What perhaps all can agree on is that DSP strikes chords. Within Writing Studies it has rapidly gained popularity and near-unanimous praise, very much in keeping with what Huot and Neal describe as the typical course for new assessment technologies: “The dominant discourse of writing assessment is that new technologies necessarily are better than the old, and that the progress represented by the technology generally benefits society” (419). (Notably, DSP is increasingly linked to web-based wizards, another new technology [Jones].) DSP, first developed (and abandoned) at Colgate in the 1990s (Howard; Harrington), and more widely known by Royer and Gilles’s *College Composition and Communication* article and subsequent edited book collection, is a methodology for placement that provides students with a series of questions as well as some individual and institutional data (e.g., objective test scores and course descriptions) intended to enable them to make informed choices about what writing course to enroll in. DSP is promoted as having the benefits of the very best local assessment, in that it is locally designed and controlled, and none of the disadvantages: it is not time-consuming (for students, program administrators, or expert readers); it does not occupy too much space in the semester curricula or summer orientations (in some cases completed online, before classes begin); and it is not displeasing. Indeed, the pleasingness of DSP is what most captivates us and, we imagine, others as well:

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 school 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. (Royer and Gilles, "Directed" 61)

Yet, while Royer and Gilles's description is seductive, it is important to recognize that DSP in its basic implementation is often devoid of current writing: students don't have to write essays, and teachers don't have to read them.

Certainly many implementations of DSP do include a supplemental element of writing, from Royer and Gilles's own first-day diagnostic to more elaborate pieces of writing such as Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and colleagues' "Writer's Profile" (Royer and Gilles, "Directed" 58; Lewiecki et al., 170).³ Nevertheless, writing still appears secondary, and this decentralization or deemphasizing of writing concerns us for the message it sends to students. Concluding her argument urging more attention to placement with a call for considerations of validity, Susanmarie Harrington notes that "[p]art of the validity of a placement examination . . . lies in what it communicates to students and teachers about writing. As we contemplate assessment as a tool, we should consider what our choice of tool, in our context, will communicate to students about the nature of college writing" (25), a focus on message underlined by Lewiecki-Wilson and her colleagues, Jeff Sommers and John Paul Tassoni (168). One view is that placement is a precursor to the main event – coursework – and should be dispensed with quickly and painlessly. DSP does that, though, for that matter, so do objective admissions tests. There is merit in this view, but for the fact that it may inadvertently communicate to students that their actual writing doesn't really matter much.

Our other concern with DSP is with its fundamental premise of assuming students know best, and that they can, recalling Royer and Gilles's words above, be "lure[d]. . . in the right direction" ("Directed" 61). We venture to articulate this concern, cognizant of our field's history and tradition of honoring students' knowledge. Our concern isn't a schoolmarmish rejection of student abilities, but a genuine question as to how individuals on the cusp of entering a new discourse community can possibly be in a good position to assess their abilities to write to the values of this new community. As Anne Ruggles Gere and colleagues suggest, DSP can focus attention on the past – how students performed in high school, in high school genres and competencies – and not on college writing which, we would join them in noting, is quite different. Moreover, as Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni aptly observe, DSP requires entering students "to know thoroughly the curriculum and assumptions informing each course—a clear impossibility for them" (168). While DSP programs may allow students to read

selections of student work and sometimes to meet with advisers, a nod to our concern, the burden nevertheless remains on the students.

In the context of advocating against using standardized tests for placement, Patricia Lynne notes that, historically, writing faculty have too quickly and frequently given away control of writing assessment to educational measurement experts (169), and she argues that “writing professionals have expertise more appropriate for evaluating written literacy than do educational measurement professionals,” an opinion we echo. With DSP, writing faculty discount their own expertise again, albeit in favor of student-authors, not educational measurement experts. For us, the placement assessment should meet what Norbert Elliot and others argue for: construct validity – the assessment must be as close as possible to what the course actually assesses, and it should also support student learning; as Elliot ably explains, good assessment “authentically supports student learning, the most significant consequence for anyone assessing writing in an academic community” (27).

We believe PTT can meet this requirement and has merit for writing faculty looking to resist the imposition of objective-measurement assessments for placement but not ready to give up on either faculty assessment of student writing *or* assessing all students. It speaks to faculty who wish to answer Alice Robertson’s call to “develop[] their own placement procedures that accurately reflect their own writing classes” (62) but without the expense of Stony Brook’s model, which Robertson describes as “a mini version of [their] writing courses” (57): a one-hour-long summer class that mimics the size and activities of the regular semester and concludes with an in-class diagnostic essay. Another variation of PTT is the On-line Challenge, developed by Irvin Peckham at Louisiana State University (LSU) from a model pioneered by Les Perelman at MIT, which is a hybrid of direct writing assessment and self placement and, with a nod toward cost concerns, is geared toward reviewing the work of a limited number of students. In this method, the placement experience occurs entirely online, utilizing the iMoat platform (see Perelman), in advance of the first day of classes.

As Peckham details, the On-line Challenge invites students to submit an essay in response to assigned readings if they wish to question their placement, with successful challenges leading to course exemptions. The challenge assignment imitates the final assignment in the first-semester course, increasing construct validity. Compared to LSU’s previous model of a diagnostic written in the first week of class, which had a lower construct validity, Peckham notes the following improvements: completed over the summer, it limits the first-week chaos; completed online, it addresses logistical and time issues; completed by only those students who question their

placement and are willing to put in the effort to read some articles and write an essay, it limits the number of students whose placement needs to be re-evaluated, putting less strain on faculty and LSU's budget ("Online Placement"). In the four years Peckham discusses in his 2009 article, between two and ten percent of students participated in the challenge. For forty-two percent of these participants, a different placement was recommended, indicating that their initial placement was indeed incorrect (533). While this percentage is likely high because those self-selecting students who chose to participate were motivated by the chance to place out of a course, it nevertheless suggests that many of the other ninety percent of LSU students may also have been misplaced.

We share Robertson's and Peckham's interest in validity, in what Peckham calls "get[ting] closer to assessing writing abilities that match the writing tasks we set in our first-year writing program" ("Online Placement" 518). Yet, interested in evaluating the majority of our students *and* concerned with those who are misplaced both "up" and "down," we seek to incorporate this work into the semester curricula, as Nicolay does in another version of PTT. That is, we seek a method that, as Nicolay aptly puts it, "contextualize[s]" and "embed[s]" placement within our writing program (42). While not having a remedial class allows St. John Fisher College, as Nicolay reports, to determine whether students need extra help based on a three-week first unit, such a method is less feasible for larger institutions and those with remedial courses. Nevertheless, our PTT approach incorporates similar embedding by having our placement assignment be—rather than just imitate—a college writing assignment. Furthermore, our PTT program enables us to evaluate virtually⁴ all of our students and to identify those who will likely struggle significantly in or not pass our college writing course without a basic writing experience first.

OUR PATH TO PLACEMENT AND TEACHING TOGETHER (PTT)

Montclair State University (MSU), a comprehensive public university with an incoming first-year student population of about 2000, has a sequence of two required writing courses (College Writing I and College Writing II) and a developmental course (Introduction to Writing [BW]). While all three courses share a focus on the writing process, the developmental course emphasizes helping students, in the words of the common handbook, achieve "basic competency in entry-level academic writing" and reading so as to better prepare them to grapple with "contemporary intellectual, social, and cultural issues that face citizens in our multicultural, international society" and to develop "strong argumentative" prose in subsequent

writing classes (“Writing at Montclair” 15, 17). Like many other institutions, MSU had been using placement methods that did not accurately measure students’ abilities with respect to the type of work required in our first-year writing courses. Prior to 2007, MSU used a combination of SAT scores and an in-house test. This in-house test involved a short impromptu essay along with a multiple-choice sentence-sense assessment and a reading comprehension assessment. Using this method, 13 percent of students were placed into BW on average.

Then, faced with tightening budgets and rapidly growing enrollment, in fall 2007 MSU began exclusively using the readily available SAT Critical Reading and Writing scores to determine placement. Students with an SAT Writing score of 410 were placed into CW I, while students with scores of 400 or below were placed into BW, resulting in placement of 9.5 percent of students into our basic writing course. While inexpensive and “easy,” this switch simply replaced one invalid method with another even more invalid method, as has been detailed elsewhere by Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy. To summarize their findings briefly, it was estimated that between 12 and 18 percent of students were misplaced by the SATs (531), providing evidence that SAT scores alone were inadequate in judging a student’s preparedness for the work of CW I. As one student who fell on the basic writing side of the SAT cutoff noted in a later end-of-semester survey: “People like me who have terrible hand writing are doomed to get lower scores on the written part of the SAT because the reviewers of the SATs won’t be bothered wasting an hour to try and grade one essay.” We all intuitively know that impromptu writing tests that are combined with objective multiple-choice measures fail to accurately assess many students, but, as many WPAs have found, it is difficult to challenge the efficiency and authority of major standardized tests.

Our in-house research on the effectiveness of placement by the SATs prompted a move to a PTT approach. In short, many students were taking BW unnecessarily, and even more were struggling in CW I. As a result, the WPA developed and refined the placement process summarized earlier in which all students enrolled in CW I and BW are now required to participate. This procedure, we believe, addresses many of the most significant problems of other methods by involving the kind of writing tasks required of students in the courses and, more importantly, by integrating the placement “diagnostic” into the first unit of the semester. That is, rather than being an independent, timed diagnostic or an essay completed in isolation over the summer, the document used to confirm placement serves as one of the course’s regular assignments; in this way, it does not “waste” time as some feel first-day diagnostics do (see Peckham, “Online Placement” 519)

nor does it rely on students taking the initiative to participate as does LSU's On-Line Challenge. Another improvement is that it allows all writing faculty to become involved—not just a select group of expert readers. As one faculty member commented, “I have encountered placement errors in other institutions and felt left out of the process. . . . It is important for professors to feel that their input is valued in matters of placement.”

Our path to PTT has not always been pleasing, however. After much discussion and administrative wrangling, in fall 2008 the WPA piloted a placement “confirmation” process that asked CW I and BW instructors to assign students a brief reading and writing exercise, due the second day of class (for more information, see Isaacs and Molloy 532-34). This exercise served as an early draft of the students' first unit essay that was then revised following an additional reading assignment and a class meeting with discussion and other activities to support revision. Instructors were asked to evaluate their students' first drafts for placement purposes and to forward any questionable placements to the writing program for further review. As is the case in placement processes involving a diagnostic essay (Huot; Haswell and Wyche; Smith), each submission was reviewed by an expert reader: an experienced instructor, familiar with the program and its courses. In cases where the expert reader disagreed with the classroom instructor's assessment, a second expert reader reviewed the submission.

It is worth noting that in this process inter-reader reliability (and here we include classroom instructors and expert readers) was relatively low—around 70%. On one hand, this figure reflects a significantly high portion of regular instructors (approximately 20%) being new to the institution in 2008. On the other hand, it is the result of all instructors having been put into the position of “nominators” and encouraged to submit borderline students for secondary review even if they suspected these students were probably in the right class. Yet, in keeping with Smith's findings that value “the role of expertise,” specifically “course taught expertise” over standard measures of inter-rater reliability (189), this tilt toward re-evaluation was pedagogically and programmatically right, and worth the “cost” to inter-rater reliability because it succeeded in identifying students misplaced by SAT scores alone.

The pilot program was our first effort to develop a placement method that more than replicates the type of writing typically completed in first-year writing classes as in Robertson's and Peckham's models, but “embeds” placement within our courses, to borrow Nicolay's term. Yet, this integration was not without difficulty. As faculty responses to a 2008 survey revealed, more than half of our 75 instructors reported finding it difficult to assess placement based on one draft. Nevertheless, the majority of instruc-

tors recognized that, in the words of one, “[w]hile it is difficult to schedule an essay due on the second day of class, I think that it is important to assess [students’] abilities.” Other instructors questioned the reliability of placement being determined by responses to individual instructors’ assignments rather than a standard prompt, a concern that was justified. In addition to raising questions of validity, the lack of standardization in writing prompts made students’ transition from one class to another more difficult than if the assignment had been standard across the program.

Accordingly, in revising the procedure for fall 2009, we implemented a common first assignment, developed by a committee of veteran instructors and pre-tested the previous summer with various populations, for all students in CW I and BW. This shift addressed several of the concerns raised about the pilot program: first, since all students were responding to the same assignment, it was easier to evaluate writing skills reliably; the burden on both instructors and students was eased as, second, individual instructors were relieved of the task of developing assignments for one unit; and, third, those students whose placement was changed could take their draft to their new class and not have to do a lot to catch up. As a further improvement, our new process gave students more time to work on this important assignment by sending it to them via e-mail in August. This e-mail directed students enrolled in CW I and BW to a website containing links to three articles on higher education and a writing prompt. Students were asked to bring a draft of their response to the first class meeting. Unlike the model of a one-shot diagnostic essay and in a tweaking of the pilot version, students were then directed to revise their draft, drawing upon the first day’s discussion, peer review, or other in-class activities, and their reading of a fourth article. Students then submitted this revised draft on the second day of class for placement evaluation and instructor feedback.

In addition to providing comments as part of the regular, typical program of writing instruction, instructors evaluated essays for placement based on their experience teaching writing and with the support of guidelines provided in an hour-long training session in which a rubric and anchor papers were introduced. As in the pilot version, submissions were reviewed by an expert reader, with any disagreements going to a second expert reader (for 2010, this plan was revised so that all submissions were reviewed by two or, as needed, three expert readers, leaving classroom teachers as nominators). The appeal process remained in place, a form of “self-determined advance,” a modification of DSP (see Isaacs and Molloy 533), and there was also a “boost” system wherein students who performed exceptionally well in BW could be evaluated for exemption from CW I at the end of the semester.

GRADE DATA: HOW WELL DID THE PROCEDURE WORK?

Although grade data is not definitive evidence of the success or failure of a placement method, it does warrant some attention. Notably, in our program we have a high degree of grade alignment across sections. It's a high priority for the program, and both new and returning faculty meet regularly to develop and support our abilities to grade consistently and in accordance with the program's developed grading procedures which are explicated in our shared handbook and on the program website. Faculty evaluations of student papers are regularly reviewed by peer observers, and end-of-semester grades are also examined for consistency. Grading is not an individual act in our program. Accordingly, a brief discussion of our analysis of grade data from the collective 4140 students who enrolled in BW or CW I in the fall semesters of 2009 and 2010 provides some evidence for the appropriateness and value of our PTT approach and affirms the generally positive impressions we gathered from reviewing student and faculty surveys over three years as we discuss later.

We recognize that, even while instructors' grade consistency is valued and monitored program-wide, many factors impact student performance, such as total course load, illness, family stress, and having to work, among many others. Nevertheless, looking at how these students performed, in various groupings and in comparison to average grade performance of all students enrolled in the same classes, is useful for evaluating our approach. Important populations for close scrutiny are the students who were submitted by their instructors for placement review. Looking first at the 2009 cohort, we see that of the 182 students submitted for evaluation, just half were determined to be appropriately placed, with the other half judged to need a course other than that in which they had been tentatively placed by the SATs: eight percent (14 students) provisionally placed in BW were moved to CW I, and 42 percent of those students provisionally placed in CW I (76 students) were identified as needing BW. Of these 76 students are seventeen whom we call "the unmovables": students whose placement should have been in BW but who, for various reasons, could not be moved and so ended up taking CW I, conveniently providing us with a useful group to study. Turning to the 2010 cohort, close to 45 percent of students submitted for review were determined to need a different placement, with 5 percent (16 students) moved from BW to CW I, and 39 percent (128 students) of those in CW I determined to need BW. Once again, we find a group of "unmovables," in this case 13 students.

Admittedly, some of our special populations are very small (such as those who stayed in BW or those who moved to CW I), and we have only

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two years of grade data at present. While we realize the limits of our data, it is heartening to see that the numbers largely fall in expected ranges. As the table below illustrates, those students whose placement in BW was confirmed as appropriate by PTT generally did well, with their final course grades typically being above or close to the average of all students who took basic writing (with the exception of fall 10), and, then, the subsequent semester, again better than average in CW I. This success is to be expected since these students were identified by their instructors as being among the strongest in their particular sections of BW. Next, students who were moved to BW performed similarly to the general population of BW students, suggesting their new placement was appropriate.

Table 1. Comparative Grade Data for PTT 2009 and 2010 Cohorts*

		BW Average Grade Fall	CW I Average Grade Fall	CW I Average Grade Spring	CW II Average Grade Spring
Reassigned to Intro to Writing	2009	2.39 (n=55)		2.68 (n=36)	
	2010	2.12 (n=105)		2.18 (n=73)	
Intro to Writing Placement confirmed	2009	2.73 (n=6)		2.78 (n=5)	
	2010	2.03 (n=9)		2.06 (n=5)	
Reassigned to CW I	2009		2.17 (n=13)		2.38 (n=10)
	2010		2.53 (n=15)		2.75 (n=9)
CW I Placement confirmed	2009		2.2 (n= 83)		2.35 (n=62)
	2010		1.98 (n=180)		2.41 (n=125)
“Unmovables”	2009		1.85 (n=17)		1.95 (n=12)
	2010		1.52 (n=14)		1.88 (n=5)
General Population	2009	2.32 (n=232)	2.54 (n=1951)	2.12 (n=386)	2.51 (n=1806)
	2010	2.13 (n=255)	2.36 (n=1815)	2.04 (n=420)	2.39 (n=1738)

*Table reports grade data for students who took either BW and CW I or CW I and CW II in consecutive semesters beginning in Fall 2009 or Fall 2010. Grade data does not include students who withdrew or students who took their second writing course (CW I or CW II) in a later semester.

Moreover, these students who were moved to BW were more successful than the “unmovables,” who present a comparison group of sorts—modeling what may have been the fate of the students reassigned to BW if their provisional placement had not been changed. By a significant margin, the “unmovables” fared the worst of all populations. In both years, their average grades in both CW I and our second-semester course, College Writing II (CW II), were below the 2.0 GPA needed to maintain academic standing at MSU. While certainly outside factors and distractions affect how individual students do in a particular course during a particular semester, it seems apparent, as our faculty reviewers believed, that these students were not ready to succeed in CW I.

Turning to those students moved to CW I by PTT, we find they fared quite similarly to or even better than those CW I students recommended for placement review but determined to be ready to stay in CW I—in both that course and the subsequent CW II—suggesting their change in placement was appropriate. Those students whose placement in CW I was confirmed performed below average, as would be expected for students whose writing was identified as being among the weakest in their sections. Overall, the grade data suggests the success of the approach and also provides further evidence that SAT scores alone—which ranged widely for the population of students moved in both 2009 and 2010—were inadequate in judging individual students’ preparedness for the work of CW I.

HARD TO PLEASE

While grade data suggests that students’ final placement was appropriate, supporting the validity of the assessment, we wondered if our students and faculty were happy with our new process, recalling Royer and Gilles’s remarks about the pleasing nature of DSP, and furthermore, we wondered if in fact happiness matters in placement. To ascertain perspective on the placement process, including participants’ emotional responses, we developed anonymous surveys which were deployed near the end of the fall 2009 and 2010 semesters and tailored to specific general and special populations: a selection of students enrolled in BW and CW I; and students whose placement had changed as a result of the placement process; additionally, faculty teaching BW and/or CW I were surveyed early in fall 2009 for immediate reactions and again at the end of the fall 2009 and 2010 semesters.⁵

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Overall, students judged their placement as appropriate, with the CW I general population feeling most confident: 97%/96% (the first score indi-

cates data from 2009, the second from 2010) believed their placement was either “educationally appropriate” or “probably educationally appropriate”; 78%/89% of those moved to CW I from BW felt similarly. While the BW students surveyed were less confident about their placement, still the majority felt they had been placed in the right class: 68%/73% of students whose provisional placement was confirmed and 71%/73% of students who were moved into BW felt that their placement was at least “probably educationally appropriate.” Although these numbers pleased *us*, we recognize that feeling as though their placement was appropriate does not necessarily correlate with the *students’* feeling pleased. To determine whether our PTT approach was too burdensome or disruptive, our surveys asked questions about the placement process itself. Once again, all students placed in CW I were more positive than BW students in their assessments. In response to the question “How did you feel about final placement being determined after the semester started?” 91%/86% of the general CW I population responded that it did not bother them, a feeling shared by a smaller majority of students who initially placed into BW (65%/56%).

In explaining their feelings, many CW I students expressed confidence in their writing, as did these representative respondents:

- “I felt prepared for the material and I was academically qualified to place into this class.”
- “It did not bother me because I knew that the class [CW I] was the best place for me.”

While such students demonstrated that the placement process validated their own sense of themselves as writers, others talked more about the importance of the process itself:

- “It didn’t bother me because I felt like it is part of college and we should do all of the work required.”
- “The placement procedure was a great idea [because] it allows those who are not prepared a chance instead of allowing them to fail for being on a harder level.”

In great majority, students accepted the decisions made by their new university as appropriate, as is further evidenced by these comments:

- “It didn’t bother me because if there was a mistake with me being in the wrong class I’d rather know and change my class [than] to waste time and money in a class that I do not belong in.”

- “The assigned essay was short and required as the first graded assignment for the class. I would have had to have written it regardless of the placement process.”
- “I thought it was a great idea because then if they can tell that you will do bad in the class you were signed up for, you could be put into a class that is more helpful in your case.”

In these comments we hear students valuing the new process with an appreciation for faculty expertise over College Board assessments that some may find surprising.

In response to the same question, students in BW acknowledged that the course was valuable and appropriate to them, with no less than 68%/73%, as noted above, saying that the placement was at least “probably educationally appropriate” for them. Yet, these responses do not mean that students were pleased. Indeed, 84%/83% of the respondents who had moved to BW reported that they felt concerned and/or upset when they learned their placement had changed. These results were not welcome news, we must acknowledge, and it is perhaps this finding that makes DSP and other methods which place students before classes start most appealing. In both years, a significant minority of students moved to BW expressed the belief that their writing skills were sufficient for CW I, with some noting that they just had not done their best on the placement assignment. Specifically, 29%/45% of the students who were moved to BW as a result of the placement process indicated that being placed in BW conflicted with their sense of themselves as writers while only 13%/12% of students who were originally placed in BW held this viewpoint. More generally, 73%/66% of the CW I general population and 68%/69% of the BW general population characterized their writing skills as average. Under DSP, we can assume that all of these students would probably elect to take CW I immediately. Students’ positive perception of their writing may in fact help explain why between 75% and 85% of students in Gere and colleagues’ study rejected the DSP-generated advice to take basic writing (162).⁶ From the WPA’s previous research we can surmise that many of these students would pass their classes, but their success rates in college, as determined by grades in subsequent writing courses and overall GPAs, would be significantly lower than their peers who took BW (Isaacs and Molloy 532); despite their view of their writing, it seems likely that many would have fared as poorly as the “unmovables” discussed earlier.

A second concern, expressed by 26%/15% of students who were moved to BW, centered on the practical consequences of having to take an addi-

tional course. These students worried about the costs and emphasized that BW would slow them down in completing their majors:

- “Change it. Do it based entirely on SAT scores. Now I’m a step behind everyone else. . . . Now I will have to take that class over again next semester.”
- “I don’t think schools should place people behind because it only slows them down on what they are really here for. People have majors where writing courses aren’t even needed. They shouldn’t place you in a course based on an essay. They should let everyone in [CW I] if they choose it. It’s just inappropriate.”

These latter comments raise the question of student dissatisfaction with placement into basic writing more generally, of seeing it as being held back, an issue that is familiar to many writing faculty.

Yet, most BW students, the majority of whom were placed in BW by both the SATs and PTT, are often matter of fact in their discussion of how they felt about their placement and the placement process:

- “It didn’t bother me because I knew I wasn’t a strong writer and that I need improvement and needed to take baby steps in order to improve and further develop my writing skills.”
- “I knew it was for the better and it would help me in the long run.”
- “I have been out of school for almost 2 years; therefore, my writing skill weren’t very good. I had forgotten many things such as grammar and punctuation. I felt this class helped me get back on track.”
- “My High School didn’t prepare me in writing so I felt I needed this placement.”

Notably, 45%/21% of students placed into BW by SAT scores expressed the idea that they needed the course (compared to 6%/8% of those placed into BW by PTT). What we see, then, is that our process intensifies some students’ sense of being stigmatized by basic writing placement, especially those whose placement changes. However, as the comments quoted in the previous paragraph demonstrate, it’s also clear that most of these students were bothered by the *fact* of their specific placement, rather than by the process that determined placement. Consider this response from a student moved to BW in 2010 who offers criticism of basic writing and not of the process: “I don’t think you should have this class. Eventually we all have to take [CW I] & [CW II] and it is a waste of a semester unless the student wishes to take the course to build knowledge.”

A smaller group of those students moved into BW took a middle ground (13%/3%), expressing tempered disappointment: “In a way I was upset but in another way I knew I needed it, so I’m happy with learning, there is nothing wrong with taking a class that will give you more knowledge.” Or, “I felt like I was stupid and couldn’t do what everyone else could. But I realized that it helped me out in the long run.” We see this group as similar to the majority of the students we come to know in the BW classes that we teach at Montclair State. Primarily first-generation college attendees, these students are anxious about the financial aspects of college as well as about their success in their intended programs of study, but finding themselves in a large university with many different degree programs and types of students, they typically do not have a fixed view of what educational coursework is best. For better or worse, they are inclined to trust us and our judgment on such matters as placement. As one BW student observed about the placement process, “I understand that the University had my best interest in mind and wanted to ensure I was properly placed.”

If not yet equipped to decide with authority what educational coursework is most appropriate for them, students are in a strong position to express their feelings about the way the placement assignment was delivered. What we found was that a significant minority of students really disliked the timeframe: they didn’t like writing when they were in “summer mode” and felt they had a right to be free of academic responsibilities. In addition, although explanatory emails were sent to students through data from the registrar and admissions, as well as directly from instructors, one third or more of our students claimed not to know that the assignment would be used to determine placement in 2009, and this reported awareness did not increase significantly in 2010 despite improvements in outreach and what we would have expected with institutionalization and student chatter. In the general CW I population, 27%/32% of students indicated they were unaware that the essay would be used for placement, while in the BW population 50%/29% indicated such lack of awareness. Such data may speak to the possibility that first-year students are simply not in a position to grasp a lot of the information that is presented to them, much less the implications of that information, a problem shared by DSP which relies primarily on student decision-making, and by methods like Peckham’s Online Challenge which ask students to take the initiative to participate. Certainly with PTT we need to acknowledge that there is some student stress with this approach – but whether this stress is greater than that of students placed in basic writing by other means is not a question our research is able to answer.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS: BETTER PLACEMENT BUT NOT PARTICULARLY PLEASED

The majority of faculty teaching CW I (61%/82%) and BW (67%/85%) found that PTT improved student placement. We see the increase in these numbers as reflective of our success in reviewing and moving more provisionally misplaced students in 2010 than in 2009. Although the percentages of CW I and BW faculty perceiving placement as being improved are roughly equal for each year, the effects of placement were felt more by BW faculty, as is typically the case with any placement method. In both years, CW I instructors were less likely to have students move into their sections: 70%/63% of respondents to our CW I faculty survey reported that no students had been transferred to their sections. In contrast, no BW instructors reported having fewer than two students move to their sections, with 56%/72% having four or more new students as a result of the placement process.

Yet, while they agreed that placement was improved through the process, faculty, especially CW I instructors, were less pleased by the process itself, particularly in the first year of full implementation. Perhaps because they worked with fewer students whose placement had changed, in 2009 CW I faculty were less sure that the benefits of the placement procedure outweighed the challenges (50 percent compared to 66 percent for BW faculty), although in 2010 66 percent believed the benefits outweighed the challenges. In 2009, faculty found the 24-hour turn-around time to submit essay drafts for review stressful, a problem that was relieved by extending this window to 48 hours in 2010. Some faculty were concerned that they were not able to judge writing skills accurately based on one early draft, and still others voiced concern with how the assignment fit in with how they had developed *their* course – suggesting a more diverse set of objectives and outcomes for BW and CW I than we expected and ultimately would hope for. These challenges reported by faculty were helpful in making clear to us that we need to take full advantage of the faculty development aspect of PTT, and to continue to engage the core FYW faculty in the design and testing of each year's assignment. Both students *and instructors* should perceive the placement assignment as being representative of the work of the course. Further, by developing and requiring a common assignment, veteran faculty are also able to model and collaboratively troubleshoot implementation of a program's pedagogical principles, bringing newer and less experienced faculty more quickly and fully aboard.

While a common assignment can model the work of the course for faculty and build greater consistency across the program, it is also connected

to a final *displeased* theme that we noticed in our faculty surveys: disappointment over the partial loss of autonomy that accompanies a common assignment. As survey data reveals, this loss was felt especially keenly by some instructors: while 44%/43% of BW faculty believed that the common assignment made course planning easier, 34%/19% of CW I faculty found it made course planning harder. As answers to subsequent questions show, these responses in part reflect our instructors' relative, but decreasing, discomfort with common assignments and, more particularly with the specific fall 2009 assignment on the value of higher education which was ultimately too challenging and perhaps too dry. Although we believe it is impossible to ever make *all* faculty truly delighted with an assignment they didn't individually develop, we seem to have successfully addressed these problems with a new assignment in 2010 (see appendix). Notably, in both years BW faculty were more accepting of a common assignment, none expressing a dislike of common assignments, though two instructors expressed a preference for designing their own assignments. The BW faculty's greater acceptance is no doubt in part because they are a smaller group, more experienced with collaboration and common texts. Yet, encouragingly, CW I faculty display a growing acceptance of this aspect of our procedure: while in 2009 37 percent of CW I faculty respondents preferred to design their own assignments, this percentage dropped noticeably, to 13 percent, in 2010; similarly, while in 2009 eight percent disliked common assignments, in 2010 only three percent indicated such an opinion.

Although in both years the criticism of common assignments was expressed by a minority of faculty, we interpret its expression as indicative of the high value that faculty place on the freedom and control that our program, and many other programs, have historically granted first-year writing faculty. Unlike our counterparts in secondary schools and in many introductory college science disciplines, it is not unusual for college writing faculty to individually determine topics, readings, assignments, and many other aspects of instruction, albeit within some guidelines. Furthermore, a common assignment may compete with instructors' sense of themselves. As one instructor helping test assignments for fall 2010 remarked, "My assignments are an extension of me as a teacher. This method of using a generic prompt suggests that we are interchangeable as teachers, in a way, doesn't it?" Even though our placement system values faculty as initial and expert readers, a common placement assignment, like many other program-wide assessment instruments, threatens this individualization—with respect to the first assignment most obviously, but perhaps in other less obvious ways as well. Such comments raise a question for future consideration and research as to what extent teacher individualization is desirable for student

learning. Based on the fall 2008 pilot in which an instructor-designed placement instrument resulted in an uneven level of difficulty, for now we can say that individualization is not especially desirable for placement, or perhaps for a university-required course in first-year writing. Indeed, it may be that PTT is particularly appropriate for writing programs like ours which see value in adopting a degree of standardization in our instruction *and* assessment.

REFINEMENTS

After three years, our curriculum-based, expert-reader approach to placement is still a work in progress, and faculty and student comments continue to offer us insights into how the approach should be further refined. In 2010, we were happy to give instructors additional time to submit cases for placement review, and in 2011, we have added an online submission system, making it easier for instructors and readers. In addition, though we suspect we will achieve varying responses to future assignments from faculty and students alike, we will continue to develop and pre-test more thoroughly each year's common assignment. As noted, faculty are used to having a high level of control over reading and assignment choices, and a common placement essay takes away the privilege and pleasure of individual choice, though with institutionalization of this method, our faculty seem to mind less. Even so, it is important for any program contemplating in-house placement to not only pre-test the assessment, but also post-test it, and then demonstrate some flexibility and willingness to revise based on community responses.

Another significant challenge for in-house placement is communication. For example, although we felt that the Writing Program's summer email to students made clear that the first assignment was mandatory and would be used for placement, our survey research demonstrated that these points need to be better stressed. Starting in 2010, we now ensure that instructors include standard language about this assignment's purpose on their course syllabi. In addition, following David Blakesley's suggestions for implementing a new placement system in "Directed Self-Placement in the University," we have worked to communicate better with allied departments, in Admissions, Assessment, and New Student Experience. Further, our university has recently adopted a common summer reading program for incoming students, and both the book program itself and our plans to use this text for placement have been widely distributed. We remain hopeful for increased communication, though it is true that we had anticipated better results from our 2010 surveys and were disappointed – and surprised – by

so many students still reporting ignorance of the placement function of the assignment. We suspect that in our first three years, other departments on campus may have resisted the new placement method and imagined we would go back to the cleanness of the SAT or Accuplacer. In further conversations with allied programs, we have made clear, however, that we are in the messy business of reading student writing for the long haul, and this growing community acceptance has led to useful—and continuing—conversations about how to best inform and support our students.

BIAS

A more complex problem that our research raises is whether or not our method has indeed enabled adequate identification of students whose provisional placement was inappropriate. To review, from early research, the WPA estimated that between 12 and 18 percent of students were misplaced by the SATs alone (Isaacs and Molloy 531); however, in 2009, only 7.7 percent of students had instructors who suggested they were in the wrong class, and only half of these were judged by the expert readers and administrators as actually needing movement; in total, we moved only 3.8 percent of our total population in 2009. In our analysis of these disparate findings, we came to several conclusions, some of which were actionable.

First, we believed our faculty needed more training and support in identifying students who may be misplaced. Since our early faculty surveys conveyed some resistance to the placement process, we wondered whether that resistance inspired incomplete participation. What is more, we found an occasional comment that suggested many CW I faculty saw BW as a punishment, and so we speculated that these individual points of view may have led some faculty to “protect” their students by not submitting them for further review. While we appreciate individual instructors’ desire to work with underprepared students in our mainstream course, not submitting them for review in effect means that such students would lose the benefits in place to help BW students, including a smaller class and increased support from the writing center. These concerns about faculty identification and participation led to the development of a more robust initial training session and support materials for faculty as well as to the requirement that faculty submit at least one student per section in 2010. While in 2009 13 percent of faculty did not submit any students’ work for review, in 2010 we not only had full participation but the majority of faculty submitted more than the minimum required (87 percent of CW I faculty submitted two or more students’ work per section, as did 58 percent of BW faculty).

Second, problems with bias were not only displayed by teachers but also may have been built into the expert-reader system itself. That is, after reflecting on our research we came to suspect that our expert-reader system, from readers to administrators, was not blind enough. Our scoring and administrative materials for the 2008 pilot and 2009 allowed expert readers and the two of us to see SAT data and initial placement information. Although in theory we had asked expert readers and ourselves simply to read and place students into one class or another, these early forms presented individual students *from* BW or *from* CW I. In other words, although we intended to replicate Smith and Huot's system of two choices, the visibility of this information may have unintentionally discouraged placement that was out of sync with what the SATs would determine. Although administrators and expert readers did not complete any particular surveys on this issue, we find a ring of truth in this instructor's comment: "I felt very uncomfortable having a placement exam in a class that students had already placed into. Who knows why they might have written a poor second placement exam. . . . They already placed into the course, so let's help them through it. . . ." We intended for the assignment alone to serve as the placement instrument; however, the power of the SATs and our effectively giving that information to readers (and administrators) at the moment they were judging student writing, appear to have worked together to discourage placement "against" the SATs, suggesting that the provisional nature of the initial placement needs to be stressed to faculty as well as students.

In addition, as administrators, we realize that a climate that sought to limit the number of basic writing classes made us politically cautious about moving students (see Isaacs and Molloy 525). Of course, it is impossible to fully blind the process; classroom instructors are unavoidably aware of the provisional placement and likely ready to see their students as members of their classroom community. Yet it is possible to build in more "blindness" for expert readers and administrators. To do so, we revised the forms for 2010 so that students' initial placement was hidden from expert readers and administrators. Readers and administrators were now asked to judge whether students should be in CW I or BW, not whether they should *stay in* or *be moved to* a specific course.

We have also taken greater advantage of PTT's function as faculty development. While it is obvious that new faculty need information about our students and courses, returning instructors are being provided with more information about the aims of our BW course as well, so that no one feels as though referring a student who had provisionally placed in CW I for placement review—or more accurately, changing that student's placement to BW—is a punishment. After doing so, we were pleased *not* to see

any comments in the 2010 post-test assessments that echoed this example from the 2008 pilot: “I did not want to *banish* a student to [BW] simply because they might not have performed at their best on one particular day, or because they had never written a critical essay and did not entirely comprehend what was expected of them” (emphasis added). While DSPers seek to “lure” students in “the right direction,” we have learned that the PTT approach requires that program leaders help faculty understand the value of our different writing courses. In short, we needed to convince faculty that, while the process may present some challenges, its goal of ensuring that all students are provided with the coursework in writing that will help them to best succeed in their academic careers is worth it, regardless of how small or large the number of provisionally misplaced students is.

Data from our 2010 refinements is encouraging. Most importantly, compared to 2009, we reviewed more students’ work (331 vs. 182) and identified and moved more misplaced students (131 vs. 73). Faculty development and greater “blindness” were clearly valuable to the integrity and consistency of our work. In 2010, 15.4 percent of students had instructors who suggested that they might be in the wrong class (up from 7.7 percent in 2009), and PTT identified fully 6.6 percent (up from 3.8 percent) of students who were in need of an alternative class from that recommended by the SATs. (It is worth noting that these numbers do not necessarily reflect increased numbers of students in BW but a return to the historical 13% average.) Although complete data is not yet available for study, we continue to monitor the progress of our students as they go forward in their writing and general education courses.

By integrating the work of placement into our curriculum, PTT has enabled us to provide appropriate writing instruction to a larger number of students than by using SAT scores alone. PTT allows students to participate in the placement process by producing writing but without burdening them with difficult choices for which they cannot yet be adequately prepared. Moreover, by asking faculty to evaluate this writing, PTT allows us to support and value our teachers’ expertise without further straining the university’s budget. As we have discovered, in-house placement through the PTT approach is hard though interesting work: in all this reading of papers and reviewing of data collected on the assessment process itself, we learn more and more about our faculty, our curricula, and our students. Thus, it is heartening that faculty acknowledge the necessity of the procedure, even if they did not initially cheer our adoption of it. As one BW faculty wrote, “I think it’s better to do the assessment than not, and I am in awe of the dept’s committee (and admins) who handled all the chaos.” In the end, we have had to reconcile ourselves with this chaotic, fluid nature of our assess-

ment, which by its thoroughness reveals important teaching and learning challenges that we would have never known about it if we left placement to students, the College Board, or even a one-shot summer writing exam. We have come to realize that the point is not to please everyone but to make informed, contextualized judgments based on students' actual writing rather than on standardized test scores or their self-assessment. And while doing our combined best to help students succeed is hard, in its own way it is also pleasing—or better yet, satisfying.

APPENDIX: COMMON PLACEMENT ASSIGNMENT FOR FALL 2010
[designed and tested by veteran first-year writing faculty]

Do Objects Make Us?

For the first day of your writing class you will need to read the three linked articles and compose a 2-3 page essay in which you reference two of the three articles to discuss how material objects may contribute to creating a self-image.

Articles

- Cave, Damien. "On Sale at Old Navy: Cool Clothes for Identical Zombies!" *Salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 22 Nov. 2000. Web. 7 June 2010.
- Miller, Laura. "We Are What We Buy." *Salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 3 June 2000. Web. 7 June 2010.
- Walker, Rob. "iPad Envy." *New York Times*. New York Times, 5 April 2010. Web. 30 June 2010.

Overview: Paul McCartney wrote the memorable words, "Money can't buy me love," and yet judging by the rate of spending on non-essential consumer goods in this country (and elsewhere), it seems like money does buy something. And that something may go beyond the use value or pleasure of an object. As the assigned articles suggest, the choices we make in the objects we buy (clothing, cars, cosmetics, sports equipment, food, communication devices, for example), the establishments we frequent (restaurants, coffee houses, salons, grocery stores, gyms, and so forth), and our entertainment options (in music, film, television, art, literature, and the like) are the subject of much debate.

Essay Question: Write a 2-3 page essay in which you consider how objects either do or do not help form, alter, or enforce the image that individuals

project to the people around them. Draw on two of the three assigned readings and reflect on your own experience to write this essay.

To construct a successful argument, you will need to have a strong central claim and to use the sources provided carefully, which is to say that you need to engage with the writers and their ideas rather than just summarizing them. In addition to referring to two of the three assigned readings, you are encouraged to draw upon your own experiences, insights, and observations.

Requirements

Length: The draft must be 2 to 3 pages long (typed and double-spaced).

Style: MLA – a full description of MLA style can be found in a writing handbook or online at <dianahacker.com/writersref>.

Sources: You must appropriately use your choice of two of the provided articles.

Academic Honesty: You are expected to write this paper alone and without consulting and using additional sources that you have not fully and appropriately cited. For help in understanding what academic honesty entails, please see: <http://www.montclair.edu/writing/firstyearwriting/academicintegrity.html>.

Further Instructions

1. Bring a hard copy of your essay (and the readings) to your first writing class.
2. Save a copy of your essay in an electronic form and place that you can access once you have begun school because you will be continuing to revise your essay after the first day of class. In college writing classes students are regularly asked to revise their essays, often several times.
3. Students who are interested in receiving feedback on their essays-in-progress are encouraged to visit the Center for Writing Excellence, open all summer and during the fall semester. Please see the website for hours and to make an appointment: <http://www.montclair.edu/cwe/>.

NOTES

1. The authors would like to thank Norbert Elliot and the WPA reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. See Mattern and Packham, College Board researchers, for a discussion of some use of cross-institutional data.

3. Royer and Gilles (“Directed”) use the first-day exercise as a “back-up,” asking teachers to offer non-binding advice concerning students’ placement choices. How much writing is incorporated depends on the local context; as Lewiecki-Wilson, Jeff Sommers, and John Paul Tassoni note, special local conditions allow them to use a process they acknowledge “might be unwieldy and too time intensive for other institutions” (166). Some placement methods, like that described by Bedore and Rossen-Knill, aim to “synthesize” DSP with writing, though they too grant that this is feasible only because they are able to limit the number of students participating (58). Our version of PTT stands out because, as the first assignment, all students must participate.

4. As Smith rightly notes, there are often a few students who start the semester late, “presumably . . . extending their vacations” (201) and thereby miss the assessment.

5. In 2009 and 2010 we surveyed a selection of BW and CW I sections, with 40/52 BW and 99/145 CW I students participating (the first score indicates data from 2009, the second from 2010); this pool reflected 17%/19% of students enrolled in BW and 5%/8% of students enrolled in CW I. Of the special populations, 31/40 students (52%/35%) whose placement changed to BW participated in our survey, while 9/9 students (64%/56%) who moved to CW I responded. In Fall 2009, 10 instructors taught BW; of these, all responded to the initial survey and 9 (90%) responded to the end-of-semester survey. Of the 56 instructors who taught CW I, 42 (75%) responded to the initial survey and 38 (68%) to the end-of-semester survey. In Fall 2010, seven of eight BW instructors (88%) responded to our survey, as did 32 of 50 CW I instructors (64%).

6. Notably, Gere and colleagues, in their very careful and admirable study of the validity of a ten-year DSP program at the University of Michigan, suggest several reasons why students may discount the DSP advice, among those being: the greater influence of adviser and peer advice, and practical challenges with the DSP assessment’s timing with respect to course registration (162-63).

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