
The Quagmire of Assessment For Placement: Talking Out of Both Sides of Our Mouths

Deborah Crusan

Wright State University, Ohio, USA

My interest in writing assessment stems from perceived injustices I witnessed while teaching English at a small western Pennsylvania community college. The philosophy at the institution in 1989, especially for basic and English as a Second Language (ESL) writers, was that students needed to learn grammar before they could ever hope to write. One of the courses I was assigned to teach—Developmental English I—especially stressed grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and short paragraph writing. The first class meeting of Developmental English I troubled me, for many of the students complained bitterly about their placement in what they referred to as 'bonehead' or 'dummy' English. They wanted to know how they had gotten there; I was unable to tell them, but I promised to investigate.

Upon questioning the Divisional Director of Humanities, I learned that incoming students took a battery of tests in English, math, and science. Depending on their scores, students were placed in either pre-college/developmental or college freshman level classes. I also learned that the English test consisted of approximately 50 multiple-choice items dealing with the mechanics and punctuation rules of English as well as spelling and vocabulary questions. Students did no actual writing on the test. The rationale for using this method of placement was cost and ease of administration; reliability and validity issues also played a part in the selection of the standardized indirect assessment administered to all incoming students.

This testing method seemed hardly fair to me. First, it asked the students to answer questions about writing, rather than asking them to write. Additionally, the test came from outside the institution; the developers did not know the students nor were they apprised of the local situation, the philosophy of the institution, or the teachers who would teach the courses. In my mind, actual student writing would certainly tell more about how these students wrote than answers to decontextualized questions.

The problems with this method of assessment played themselves out in my class. As the semester progressed, I found that many students were better writers than the scores on their placement tests indicted; sadly, it was too late in the term to move them

to a higher-level class. Conversely, some struggled and may have needed even more individualized attention than my class was designed to give. Whatever the case, instances of improper placement existed, creating a large disservice to many of the students in my class.

When I informed the students how they had been placed in my class—based on results of the multiple-choice test they took the week before classes started, many expressed displeasure; some argued that if they had known the reason for the test, they would have done better. No one had bothered to tell them the high stakes involved. Consequently, few of the students had taken the test seriously and ended up in a class that did not serve their needs and cost them financially, emotionally, and in time lost in their academic careers. I quickly learned that if students get no explanations regarding testing, they often perceive such tests as whimsical or trivial. I was left to wonder why no one had asked me my opinion about how students should be placed in my classes. When I asked about the testing situation again, I was told that it had always been done that way, and that I should not get involved in things that really did not concern me. Humbled, I felt naïve and alone. I had yet to discover that "assessment defines goals and expresses values more clearly than do any number of mission statements" (White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1996), so I could argue more effectively for alternative means of assessment.

Fast forward to 1994, when, as a rookie graduate student/teaching assistant and novice ESL instructor at a major research institution, I encountered similar hostility and questions from my university students as I had from the community college students. They demanded to know what they were doing in a basic ESL writing class rather than being placed in a regular ESL composition class that would, in their words, "count for something." I sensed their frustration as I have sensed the frustration of many students when assessment is a puzzlement (Crusan & Cornett, 2002). Further, I was stunned that the same complaints existed at this huge, well-respected university as at the tiny community college where I had taught for five years. Again, I did not know the answer to their questions, but I promised to explore the issue and report back what I found.

Meanwhile, I encountered the following: "Any valid assessment of an individual student's writing ability should include samples of a variety of writing tasks which contain genuine variations in topic, purpose, and audience" (Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990). When I read the Peyton *et al.* article, I was concerned, for in my investigation of my students' demands, I had found that the university in which I was doing graduate work used a multiple-choice grammar test (indirect assessment) to place incoming freshman into composition courses. Once again, I was at an institution that did not use writing to place students in composition classes. Worse still, it was widely

hinted that students whose first language was not English were placed in writing classes arbitrarily by their advisors without any testing whatsoever. According to everything I was reading and learning, I had just confronted what amounted to evidence of inadvertent compliance on my part and duplicity on the part of the university. Nevertheless, it was comforting to discover that I, at least, was not alone in my belief of the inappropriateness of the means of assessment I was encountering.

In my naïveté, I believed that I could reconcile the problem I had discovered by simply exposing the circumstances to those I believed would be sympathetic listeners. However, I have been soundly chastised from many corners. Some influential members of the L2 writing or writing assessment community have argued that they are no longer waiting for quantitative evidence to settle the question of whether a direct (essay) or indirect (multiple-choice) measure is better at assessing writing for any purpose (placement, proficiency, achievement). Countless articles discuss this notion and the majority favor direct assessment when a choice between the two has to be made (Bailey, 1998; Belanoff, 1991; Brand, 1992; Cooper & Odell, 1977; Kroll & Reid, 1994; Patkowski, 1991; Peyton, Staton, Richardson & Wolfram, 1990).

I have been informed that the current writing assessment debate focuses instead on degrees of the authenticity of direct measures: how authentic is authentic enough? Or, more concretely, the debate frequently focuses on the single-draft, timed, impromptu essay score versus a portfolio score. Finally, others debate the value of hermeneutics over more positivistic approaches to evaluating writing (Broad, 2000). Nevertheless, the reality is many university administrators firmly believe in the value (mainly in terms of efficiency and cost effectiveness) of indirect measures and advocate their use at their institutions.

I tell these personal stories to set the stage for the major issue in this paper, which really has little to do with whether direct assessment for placement is better than indirect assessment. That battle has been fought and is purported to have been won (Hamp-Lyons, 1990). The central issue is that indirect assessment for placement still continues; in fact, as late of the early-nineties, it was used at approximately half of America's higher education institutions (Huot, 1994). Through my paper, I wish to begin to make the invisible visible, to call attention to a situation that exists despite the fact that the composition community has recognized the limitations of indirect assessment, and to muster support for change.

I have determined that a problem exists because I have dealt with it at two of the three institutions where I have been a faculty member. And I believe that others are struggling with this issue as well, particularly those who serve alone or in very small groups at smaller institutions and community colleges who are battling to change

writing placement methods to more humanistic forms. This is the material reality. In *Fact*, Condon (1998) states:

Unfortunately, holistically-scored, timed writings never represented the majority practice in writing assessment. That position remains rather firmly the domain of the multiple-choice test; even today, SAT-V and ACT/English are the most often used methods for placing first-year college students into composition courses (p. 87-88).

When I question why any university would contradict writing assessment theory, I am reminded that "assessment is a site of contention, where legitimate disputes over educational issues play themselves out" (White, 2001).

These disputes point to political interests and the critical academic issue of who holds the power. Shannon (2001) asserts, "Whatever evidence advocates deem most important to make their case for whomever controls the definitions of these terms [literacy, reading] is not only in for a big payday from subsequent consumption of appropriate commodities, but they are in position to influence, if not determine, what type(s) of literate citizens will populate America." Although the commodities Shannon refers to are reading commodities such as basal readers and "teacher proof" reading systems, his message clearly is that definitions of literacy differ depending on who is doing the defining. The same holds true for writing and its assessment. Whoever holds the power to define writing at a given institution gets to provide input into what kind of assessment will be used to test writing. Ultimately, it should be those who have been schooled in composition theory. Shannon reminds us that it does not always work that way, that those in control are often those who are least prepared to make the decisions that will affect students' and teachers' lives. If those holding the reins of power deem writing to be merely an exercise in filling in the blanks, the assessment chosen to test writing ability will match this definition.

What is placement and why is it important?

One of the most important assessment procedures involves testing students to make placement decisions about applicable writing courses at the college or university freshman level. Johnson (1980) states that "placing students at the appropriate English composition level to increase their chances of success is a recurrent problem at colleges and universities nationwide" (p. 91). From personal experience, I have seen arguments surrounding assessment confounded by intertwined political and academic considerations.

Placement tests commonly categorize students into teaching groups; moreover, they are purported to provide information concerning the examinees' level of language ability

in order to place them in appropriate composition classes. The method of placement used by an institution does more than what it is designed to do; it also reveals an institution's philosophy about writing and the importance the institution places on writing. What can we be saying to our students when we give them a multiple-choice grammar test purporting that it can measure how well they write?

Another issue to consider in the placement of students is test development. In a perfect situation, assessment instruments should be developed locally, that is, developed at the institution where the test will be given. Placement testing is specific to the school setting; as a result, placement tests are often created by institutions to serve their own needs. In that way, the test will measure what the institution needs to measure for its specific classes. Therefore, a placement test that works well at one institution may not necessarily be transferable to another. Additionally, the test should have the ability to place into several different classes (basic, ESL, honors).

The paradox of what do we do and what should we do

Huot (1994) reported on an investigation into the types of assessment institutions used for placement. He surveyed 1080 institutions through a mailed questionnaire which collected data concerning method of placement, composition curriculum and option, satisfaction with the placement in place, procedures and personnel, and administration of placement procedures among other things. In this paper, Huot reasoned that in the short time direct assessment has been accepted, we have made considerable headway into the field of assessment. A mere twenty-five years previous to the study, nearly all placement was done using an indirect measure. At the time of the study, half of the institutions surveyed reported using actual writing to place students into composition classes. Unfortunately, this means that half of the institutions surveyed still used an indirect method as the sole means of placement. My own experience bears this out, first at a small community college, then at a very large university.

Huot's study also revealed that of the institutions using some form of direct assessment, 54% used outside criteria to rate the writing, and 30% used only one rater per paper. What Huot found is a major contradiction between theory and application. In a personal conversation (2001, March), he stated that he strongly believes that the results of his 1994 study remain valid today.

In 2001, the Committee on Second Language Writing submitted a statement (CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers) to the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Board of Directors of TESOL (Teaching of English to Speaker of Other Languages). Both organizations endorsed the statement, which proposes guidelines on the ethical treatment of ESOL writers in terms of placement, assessment, class size, academic credit, teacher preparation, and teacher

support. The statement calls for decisions regarding placement to be based on students' writing ability. It further states that "scores from direct assessment of students' writing proficiency should be used, and multiple writing samples should be consulted whenever possible" (CCCC Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers, 2001, pp. 670-671). Evidently, the field is in agreement about what we should do; however, what we state as a group and what we do as individual institutions, administrators, testers, and teachers, are at variance. We cannot look the other way as assessment for placement is played out in ways that do not resonate with the collective understanding of ethical placement strategies.

Who does assessment for placement affect?

Assessment for placement of freshman in composition courses at the university level is regarded as high stakes assessment. The individuals affected are the best takers and the teachers who teach in the program. Theoretical and philosophical viewpoints of institutions and large-scale test developers concerning assessment for placement are well-documented (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Breland, 1983; Greenberg, 1992; White, 1996); however, it is also important to consider the opinions of the two groups most impacted by the assessment measures undertaken by institutions and large testing bureaucracies: the teacher and the student (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

Of utmost importance is teacher perception of student writing ability and of assessment. Johnson (1999) states: "The assumptions you make about your students have a tremendous impact on the nature of your reasoning and the nature of your teaching practices" (p. 143). She suggests that the teacher must know her students, what is difficult for them, what they already know, what ignites their curiosity. From this, it can be assumed that teachers might care very much about their students' placement and be affected by such decisions in terms of student satisfaction concerning placement and homogeneity of student population in terms of writing ability.

The issue of involvement of the teacher in testing has been raised by a number of researchers (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Larsen, 1987). "By calling for essay testing . . ., teachers have hoped to gain power over assessment and hence over the definition of what is to be valued in education; they have attempted to impose the educational vision in which assessment is a vital support for the learner onto the institutional vision in which assessment is a sorting and certifying device" (White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1996, p. 9). Clearly, we need to make transparent our philosophy of composition through our means of assessment.

Smith (1993) describes an assessment program where scoring guidelines and numerical data were thrown out in favor of procedures which utilized teacher knowledge of students and courses. According to Smith (1993), the results were both

more accurate and much more cost-effective than traditional testing. As an extension of this idea, it can be reasoned that the teacher might be the best determiner of accurate placement of students and also know better than others the true writing ability of students. When informed teachers begin to discover that knowledge is power, they acquire the tools necessary to start convincing those in power to use and develop better types of writing assessment procedures.

Besides the impression on teachers, students are immensely impacted by tests. Bachman and Palmer (1996) argue that "One way to minimize the potential for negative impact on instruction is to change the way we test so that the characteristics of the test and test tasks correspond more closely to the characteristics of the instructional program" (p. 33). If this is so, then we must begin to look critically at assessment instruments that place students in composition classes particularly if those instruments do not correspond closely to the instruction in the class. If writing is the instruction, then writing should be used in the testing (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brand, 1992). It makes little sense to use assessments which place students in ill-suited classes marginalizing both the teacher and the students.

The issue of involvement of students and their perceptions of writing assessment are often overlooked or not directly addressed. Those involved in testing certainly consider the student when designing the testing instruments, but the student is left out of important decisions regarding how to test and the impact that the assessment of writing has on these students. Student input into all facets of the design, prompts, and assessment criteria is essential.

When developing measures to assess writing ability for placement purposes, test developers should consider what the students want from writing assessment. White (1996) recounts that a student, assigned the topic "Why Write?" as the first paper in a basic writing class responded unforgettably. He wrote, "They make you write so they can getcha!" (p. 21). Unfortunately, this attitude is rampant among students who often view assessment as punitive and arbitrary. White (1996) contends that "writing assessment based on the interests of students and other marginalized groups" would certainly include "assessment that largely ignores surface features of dialect and usage, focusing instead on critical thinking and creativity" (p. 23), notions difficult to assess through a multiple-choice test.

"The most important consideration in any assessment is the purpose, or use, for which it is intended" (Bachman, 2000, p.x). Various marginalized groups among students, including not only racial and ethnic minorities but also groups such as the middle-aged, women, and athletes, tend to see assessment as part of the apparatus that has traditionally worked to their detriment. Patkowski (1991) concludes, ". . . important

placement decisions which can greatly affect the academic futures of students should not be solely made on the basis of a single score on any particular test, but rather should depend on a wider, more "authentic" base of information in order to reduce barriers to the retention of minority language college students" (p. 738). Authenticity pertains to how representative the assessment task is of the actual task (Bachman & Palmer, 1996); in other words, if we are trying to determine how well a person drives a car, an authentic means of assessing that skill would be to have the person actually operate a vehicle, which is usually what one does when taking a driving test.

Clearly, ESL writers are marginalized by indirect tests used to assess writing ability and, because of them, may never gain access to the academic discourse community of the university. ESL students, because they generally have memorized grammar rules very well, tend to score very high on tests like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). As a result, these students may be placed in composition classes above their ability, possibly preventing them from gaining the academic writing skills needed to succeed in a university setting (Greenberg, 1992). Blanton (1987) states that her students are frightened of writing in English because they may not do well enough on exams to be able to move ahead academically and graduate. Such feelings plant the seeds of their own destruction. How frightening must it be when one of our ESL students is placed above ability, becomes frustrated, and leaves, never to have that opportunity to advance?

Even though our students may believe the contrary and at first rejoice that they have been placed in composition classes where expectations might prove to be above their ability at the time, basic or remedial writing classes, ESL included, are not all bad. In fact, several studies indicate that students who have not taken a series of remedial classes drop out of school at almost three times the rate as their peers who have taken remedial/developmental course. Clearly, a strong relationship exists between appropriate writing instruction and remaining in college (White, 1995).

These students, misplaced in higher level composition classes, may also be marginalized by teachers' attitudes toward them. Zamel (1995) contends that many teachers display a "belief that language and knowledge are separate entities, that language must be in place and fixed in order to do the work in the course" (p. 509). Therefore, if such students are placed in these teachers' classes, the teachers may see them as inadequately prepared to handle the coursework. In reality, these teachers may not be conversant or skilled in working with such students. Therefore, these teachers often do not invite ESL students into serious engagement with the course material (Zamel, 1995) because they see the language problems as a sign of a lack of intellect.

On the other hand, native English speakers, because they have not studied grammar in so intense a fashion and may be better at using the language than describing it, may

be underplaced in composition classes. In light of this knowledge, composition is marginalized by placement tests which purport to "measure" writing ability but do nothing more than allow universities to compile statistics which can be passed off as predictors of grades in composition classes (Crowley, 1995; Odell, 1995; Shor, 1992).

In short, then, placement procedures are powerful tools which might affect both ESL and native English speakers academically, emotionally/psychologically, financially, and in their relationships with teachers and with other students.

Walking our talk

As a field, we need to stop putting our heads in the sand. In many ways, we have already taken the initiative through efforts such as the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers in order to insure that our colleagues get the message that L2 writers are to be "treated fairly, taught effectively, and thus, given an equal chance to succeed in their writing-related personal and academic endeavors" (Silva, 1993, p. 671). Consequently, institutions using inappropriate means of assessment are guilty of promising freedom, the development of human capacity, the social form of higher education with which a person can achieve great things.

Instead, these institutions continue to marginalize certain students to the fringe of the university, outside the discourse community. Simon (1987) proposes:

That as educators both our current problem and our future project should be an educational practice whose fundamental purpose is to expand what it is to be human and contribute to the establishment of a just and compassionate community within which a project of possibility becomes the guiding principle of social order (p. 141).

One of the primary goals in writing this paper was to trouble the question—to call attention to a situation and possibly to open an ongoing and necessary dialogue concerning the need to consider the state of assessment for placement, especially for ESL writers. Again, I am not talking about the elite, tier one universities although I personally am aware of several that use indirect assessment. Instead, I am talking about two- and four-year institutions where the lone ESL person faces questions of placement methodology and needs ammunition for the battle with administration. There is no easy answer, and I am well aware that the position forwarded in this article is not without its own problems. No monolithic solutions exist. The field needs to take leadership through more research and also through clearly defining objectives and processes. Matsuda (1998) states that "despite the growth of the ESL population, there has not been a corresponding increase in the amount of attention given to ESL students in many writing programs" (p. 99). With that in mind, I propose we entertain several questions.

Among them: What is the nature of the disconnect between theory and practice? Do we practice what we preach? How can we get administrators and teachers on the same page? How can we make assessment part of a process rather than an isolated task?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Harvey Bank, Chris Hall, Angela Beumer Johnson, Karen E. Johnson, Nancy Mack, Alex MacLeod, and David Seitz for their thoughtful and insightful comments on various drafts of this paper.

References

- Bailey, K. M. (1998). *Learning about language assessment: Dilemmas, decisions, and directions*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Bachman, L. (2000). Foreword. In G. Ekbatani, & H. Pierson (Ed.), *Learner-directed Assessment in ESL* (pp. ix-xii). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Belanoff, P. (1991). The myths of assessment. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 1(1), 54-66.
- Blanton, L. L. (1987). Reshaping ESL Students' perceptions of writing. *ELT Journal*, 41(2), 112-118.
- Brand, A. G. (1992). Writing assessment at the college level (No. EDO-CS-92-06). Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.
- Breland, H. M. (1983). *The Direct Assessment of Writing Skill: A Measurement Review* (College Board Report No. 83-6, ETS RR No. 83-32). New York: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Broad, B. (2000). Pulling your hair out: Crises of standardization in communal writing assessment. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35, 213-260.
- CCCC statement on second-language writing and writers. (2001). *College Composition and Communication*, 52(4), 669-674.
- Condon, W. (1998). Teaching and assessing writing: Common ground. *Composition Studies: Freshman English News*, 26, 83-95.
- Cooper, C. R., & Odell, L. (1977). *Evaluating writing: Describing, measuring, judging*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Crowley, S. (1995). Composition's ethic of service, the universal requirement, and the discourse of student needs. *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, 15(2), 227-239.

- Crusan, D., & Cornett, C. (2002). The cart before the horse: Teaching assessment criteria before writing. *The International Journal for Teachers of English Writing Skills*, 9, 20-33.
- Greenberg, K. (1992). Validity and reliability issues in direct assessment of writing. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 16(1-2), 7-22.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1990). Second language writing: Assessment issues. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 69-87). Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1996). The challenges of second-language writing assessment. In E. M. White, W. D. Lutz, & S. Kamusikiri (Eds.), *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices* (pp. 226-240). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Huot, B. (1994). A survey of college and university writing placement practices. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 17(3), 49-65.
- Johnson, K. E. (1999). *Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Johnson, N. W. (1980). A successful placement test for basic writers. In L. N. Kasden & D. R. Hoerber (Eds.), *Basic writing: Essays for teachers, researchers, administrators* (pp. 91-104). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kroll, B., & Reid, J. (1994). Guidelines for designing writing prompts: Clarifications, caveats, and cautions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3(3), 231-255.
- Larsen, S. C. (1987). *Assessing the writing abilities and instructional needs of students*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Matsuda, P. K. (1998). Situating ESL writing in a cross-disciplinary context. *Written Communication*, 15, 99-221.
- Odell, L. (1995). Basic writing in context: Rethinking academic literacy. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 14(1), 43-55.
- Patkowski, M. S. (1991). Basic skills tests and academic success of ESL college students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(4), 735-738.
- Peyton, J. K., Staton, J., Richardson, G., & Wolfram, W. (1990). The influence of writing task on ESL Students' written production. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 24(2), 142-167.
- Shannon, P. (2001). *iShop you shop: Raising questions about reading commodities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Silva, T. (1993). Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 657-675.

- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Simon, R. I. (1987). Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility. In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political: Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education* (pp. 139-151). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Smith, W. L. (1993). Assessing the reliability and adequacy of using holistic scoring of essays as a college placement program technique. In M. L. Williamson & B. Huot (Eds.), *Validating holistic scoring for writing assessment: Theoretical and empirical foundations* (pp. 142-205). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- White, E. M. (1995). The importance of placement and basic studies: Helping students succeed under the new elitism. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 14, 75-84.
- White, E. M. (1996). Power and agenda setting in writing assessment. In E. M. White, W. D. Lutz, & S. Kamusikiri (Eds.), *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices*, 9-24. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- White, E. M. (2001). The opening of the modern era of writing assessment: A narrative. *College English*, 63, 306-320.
- White, E. M., Lutz, W. D., & Kamusikiri, S. (1996). *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Zamel, V. (1995). Strangers in academia: The experiences of faculty and ESL students across the curriculum. *College Composition and Communication*, 46(4), 506-521.

About the Author

Deborah Crusan is Assistant Professor of TESL/Applied Linguistics at Wright State University, Dayton, OH where she teaches classes in linguistics, assessment, and grammar. Her research interests include the politics of writing assessment, directed/guided self-placement and its consequences for second language writers, teacher education, and International Teaching Assistant issues.