
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS: THE CONTEXT

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In the first part of the presentation, Linda Meeker described the profiles of student ability that she had designed. Urged by pedagogical imperatives to implement a new writing course placement formula at Ball State University, Meeker gathered data for five entering classes (1983, 1985-88) on composition course and competency exam grades, withdrawals, repeats, university retention rates, university graduation, high school records, learning styles as measured by the Meyers-Briggs Type indicator (MBTI), and self-assessment indicators of writing or studying difficulties. The resulting profiles highlighted the diversity of the student population rather than the homogeneity that geographical distribution and socioeconomic indicators might suggest. This diversity cannot be ignored; even the most finely tuned placement system must combine groups of students whose profiles differ but which predict success at a particular level of instruction.

Meeker then discussed the problems that writing teachers and program directors face: how do we accommodate diversity in the classroom? Program directors can shape flexible classroom environments two ways: by selecting suitable faculty and providing them orientation and in-service training, and by establishing competency requirements that promote flexibility. Writing teachers can attend to the individual learning styles, composing habits, and needs of students while enabling them to meet requirements for credit in a particular course.

In the second part of the presentation, Marsha Groff discussed her current research on individual differences. College basic writers bring with them differing skills, abilities,

personality types, and learning styles. Frequently the research on basic writers neglects this diversity by focusing on what these writers cannot or do not do when they write instead of emphasizing their strengths or what they do when they write. Inclusion of personality type in the composition classroom offers insight into the strengths each personality type brings to writing.

Groff described research in progress investigating the relationship between personality type as measured by the MBTI and the writing strategies employed by basic writers in two classes at Ball State University. While the MBTI can predict the type of environment and instructional methods which can aid or hinder learning for a particular student, it cannot predict how a student actually reads, writes, or studies. Through process logs, self-evaluation questionnaires, and writing journals, students documented the writing strategies they used throughout the semester. These process instruments will also show if students are employing processes that demonstrate their personality types or learning styles. In addition, this study will indicate if students use preferred processes in writing as predicted by personality type as they write and learn or if a shift toward these preferred processes occurs as students move away from inappropriate writing strategies adopted from previous writing instruction.