

PLACEMENT TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speakers: Donald Dunham, *University of Pittsburgh*
Syd Coppersmith, *Carnegie Mellon University*
Introducer/Recorder: John G. Cotter

Donald Dunham opened the session by noting that to ensure proper placement of students in composition courses they should be asked to write an impromptu essay on a presented topic. Dunham then discussed a study done at the University of Pittsburgh to examine how varying the structure of a topic affects students' writing.

Three randomly selected groups were used: students in Basic writing courses; students in General Writing courses; and students in Advanced Writing courses. Three topic structures were used. TS1: an open structure in which students were asked to think of a time they did something creative, to describe the event and then explain what a creative act seems to involve; TS2: a closed structure in which students were asked to read a passage of 206 words from D. H. Lawrence describing a time when he did something creative. The students were asked to describe what they thought Lawrence did and then form a generalization about what a creative act seems to involve; and TS3: a closed structure in which students were asked to read three passages (the Lawrence passage, one by A. E. Housman, and one by Henry Miller), to describe what they thought each author did and form a generalization about what a creative act seems to involve.

Dunham went on to describe how the data were

collected, how the essays were rated on a scale of 1 to 4, and how the errors were analyzed. The results indicated that the different topic structures produce different quality. There was also a group effect and an interactive effect. The advanced writing students outperformed the basic writing students, both overall and on each structure. Dunham stated that the conclusions of the study indicate that the structure of the topic does appear to make a difference in quality, fluency, and total errors. Dunham would cautiously suggest the following: for placement tests, one must first decide which types of students should be most clearly identified and distinguished. If higher-ability writers are to be distinguished from average and lower-ability writers, TS1 seems to be the best. But if the characteristics of lower-ability writers are to be distinguished, TS3 seems best. If the essay is to be used for diagnosing the abilities and problems of individual students, either TS1 or TS3 would be best because they elicit the greatest length and the greatest number of errors. TS2 seems to be the least appropriate overall.

Syd Coppersmith described Carnegie Mellon University's testing program. Their placement tests are rated holistically, and about 20% of the students are found to be misplaced. As a result of first-day class testing this past year, 4% of the students were moved to other composition classes. These changes in placement decisions usually reflect the fact that some students' writing abilities improved during the time between testing and the beginning of the semester.

Coppersmith concluded by stating that it is better to place students on the basis of their writing ability than on their ability to perform well on a standardized test.