

## PLACEMENT TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

**Speaker:** William Smith, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Introducer/Recorder:** Sue K. Horn, University of Akron, Ohio

As he introduced his topic, William Smith reminded his audience that when they use placement tests, they must first assume that “places” exist; that is, there must be various levels of instruction in which to enroll students to optimize their progress. There are also many ways to derive such placement, the most common being SAT scores and/or direct assessment with an essay. Even though placement essays may be graded holistically, such assessment is not necessarily the same as purely holistic rating. Since the placement essays may represent an abnormal distribution of the population, one cannot expect to always see bell-curved data when examining test results.

Smith suggests seven steps in a basic schematic for a placement program: (1) Determine your program’s theory

of composition and purpose(s) and teaching method(s). (2) In relation to that theory, analyze the student population’s writing abilities. (3) Determine what the composition groups will be—how many groups there will be and what each group will be taught. (4) Design an assessment method which is consistent with the theory. Depending on your theory and your purpose, that method could be a grammar test, SAT scores, or an essay. (5) Design the actual assessment tool. (6) Field-test the assessment tool with students. (7) Revise the test based on the results of the field tests. Other important items that any placement program must consider include the time to allow for testing, the date of the test, the money available for testing and scoring, and how high or low to make the pass/fail cut-off. Since such considerations and the needs of individual institutions and individual students vary so greatly and change over the years, one must not be content to do anything just once; it takes years to develop an appropriate program, and one must be content with, even enjoy, the sometimes slow process of discovering what it is one needs to know.

Smith pointed out that it is usually necessary to try out several different types of writing assignments before deciding what kind of topic best fits the particular goals

of the placement program. At Pittsburgh, Smith tried three different assignments: (1) Students were given an open topic; they were asked to write about a time when they were creative. (2) Students read a passage by D. H. Lawrence that described a time when he was creative. They were then asked to write about how Lawrence was creative and asked to respond in terms of their own creativity. (3) Students were given three passages by separate authors (all about being creative) and asked to read and respond to them. On the first assignment, the high-scoring students were rated far superior to the middle and low writers. On the second assignment, the high, middle, and low-scoring students could still be distinguished, but their scores were much closer. The third assignment, which required the reading of three passages, easily separated out the lowest scoring writers, while both the average and superior writers scored higher and closer to each other. Such results prompted Smith to point out that a school needs to try out various topics and discover which ones best suit the students and the criteria that the department actually wants to consider. Smith suggested that teachers adapt topics that have proved most successful in the classroom. Such topics should be fairly representative of what a student will actually encounter during the course of the semester in order to better predict classroom performance.

In determining how many topics to use, one must consider how much time and money are available for placement programs. If one uses three twenty-minute topics, the raters will need more time, but they can get a fairly good idea of what a writer's average work is like. Once again, one must decide whether it is an average writing sample that the program elicits or whether it is the students' best writing or worst writing that is desired. When evaluating the essays, raters must decide what it is they are to use as criteria for their evaluation—production of words, gut feelings, coherence, or something else. In any case, their criteria must be stated so that someone else can use them to help the students.

The actual conditions under which students take a placement test do, of course, make a difference in their performance. After extensive evaluation, it appears that students do best on a summer placement test if it seems as much like a classroom test as possible. When given two hours to complete their writing, 74 percent of the students in Smith's study took between sixty and ninety minutes. Only 6 percent took more than ninety minutes. However, those who took less than sixty minutes actually wrote more than the other students. Other findings were that smaller testing groups produced better writing, as did the presence of a teacher and the use of a warm-up activity. In determining the reliability of the raters, Smith and his colleagues followed up on their students. They found that students who were simultaneously rated very high and very low by different raters tended to get better grades as they progressed in their writing courses than did those who were consistently rated as "middle" by various raters. As a result, this particular phenomenon of wide-ranging scores is also taken into consideration when placing students.

Smith concluded by reminding the audience not to buy anyone else's system, for if it doesn't fit, a school may be buying someone else's mistakes. He encouraged each institution to consider its particular needs, time, money, and faculty commitment. If an assessment program is theoretically sound and its directors can sleep at night, it will probably be quite satisfactory, given enough time, patience, and imaginative hard work. ■