

“Extending Informed Self-Placement: The Case for Students’ Dispositions”

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“Why am I here? I have my AP credit. I have my dual enrollment credit. Why am I here wasting my time, not being able to write about what I want to write about?”

— “Caitlyn”

Abstract

This article calls for the revision and extension of current informed self-placement models in order to account for students’ dispositions. Placement decisions about writing courses are ultimately an act of knowledge transfer, and as such, dispositions bear great relevance. I argue placement instruments (specifically directed and informed self-placement) neglect to fully realize the complexity and consequence students are faced with when making this decision. Moreover, our research study confirms that (self-)placement decisions are highly influenced by students’ prior dispositions. Using character composites drawn from interview and focus group participants, I identify two dispositional habituses students might embody: liminal and linear. I explore how these dispositional embodiments affect not only students’ decisions about placement but also their continued relevance in students’ academic performance in university writing courses. As the first contact that students have with writing in higher education settings, I contend that students’ decisions would be better supported if placement instruments were conceived of and made with due attention to dispositional factors.

Introduction

Dispositions matter. There is a wide body of scholarship concerning students’ dispositions, but, in general, dispositions are understood to mean that which is concerned with “not only what people can do, but how they tend to invest their capabilities” (Perkins, et. al. 270).¹ For some time now, writing program administrators have acknowledged and appreciated the instructional consequences of student affect, as evinced by the endorsement of various “habits of mind” within the 2011 *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Yet despite the import assigned to students’ dispositions within the classroom, concerns related to student dispositions are frequently made to feel

¹ More specifically, Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells have previously defined dispositions as “not knowledge, skills, or abilities,” but “qualities that determine how learners use and adapt their knowledge” (para. 1). In this article, I follow Driscoll and Well’s articulation of dispositions as those affective “habits of mind”—such as openness, persistence, flexibility—which run parallel to students’ cognition but are nevertheless “crucial for learning and transfer” (Reid 293).

tangential to the managerial *métier* that frequently characterizes the structures involved with the administration of a writing program, specifically placement procedures. In other words, yes, dispositions do matter to WPAs, but, they often matter insofar as they pertain to instructional design and delivery or as they relate to institutional constraints and financial austerity measures.

The frustration expressed above by Caitlyn, however, speaks to how students' dispositions are intricately bound up in administrative structures like placement. Caitlyn is a freshman at our private, regional, liberal arts university; when I interviewed her, she was enrolled in a pilot section of our recently redesigned first-year writing (FYW) curriculum. Significant, but not unusual, to Caitlyn's experience in FYW was that it was marked by a choice about placement. As a student who entered with credit for the course, she was balking at our institution-specific requirement that she complete at least one required writing course on site (our institution has *two* required writing courses; see "Programmatic Background" below). Caitlyn, therefore, had several options regarding placement: she could take her AP credit and opt out of one—but not both—required writing courses, or she could forego her credit altogether and take both required writing courses on our campus. However, in Caitlyn's view, there was only ever one option: take her credit and opt out of as many required-writing courses allowable. And this still was unacceptable to her. She *had* her AP credit, after all. Why should she be forced to take *any* writing course? I contend that an informed self-placement model that accounted for her prior dispositions would have better helped her understand her placement choice, or to understand that she even had a choice in the first place.

This research study indicates that Caitlyn's prior dispositions inhibited her from believing that she had a choice to make. As the first instance of contact between the student and university-level writing, decisions regarding placement are highly consequential, and, unfortunately due to budgetary and time constraints, all too often forced to the background—by students and writing program administrators alike. Far from being a simple choice of which course to take, the placement decision is rather a highly complex value-judgement that occurs at the intersection of a students' pasts, presents, and anticipated futures. That is, placement decisions are about transfer; as such, dispositions *really* matter.

This research seizes upon Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Lloyd Sturman's call for WPAs to continue to "disrupt placement practices in substantive, creative, and ethical ways" ("Reclaiming" 57). By reading placement practices through the lens of transfer, I work to extend the current scholarship on placement as it relates to dispositions (Driscoll; Sturman), self-efficacy, and student reflection (Estrem, Shepherd, and Sturman, "Reclaiming") by identifying two new dispositional habituses—liminal and linear—that have the potential to endow students with more agency and self-efficacy in placement decisions. As I discuss in more detail later, a liminal habitus is recursive and attuned to incompleteness; students in this habitus view writing, learning, and indeed themselves, as iterative

and constantly in-process. Conversely, a linear student is non-recursive and believes learning happens in a lockstep progression and once a learning outcome box is checked there is no need to return to it since it has ostensibly already been mastered.

In this article, I posit that, as an act of transfer, placement instruments administered to students should be developed so as to account for students' dispositions. Put differently, the concept of "informed" cuts both ways in placement: the placement instrument should be informed about the students using it, *and*, through the instrument, students should be informed about the curricular choices before them. To this end, I first review the development of self-placement models (from directed to informed self-placement), and then contextualize our interest in placement and dispositions by providing background information about the curricular changes to our FYW program. I then share the results of my research study based on focus groups and individual interview data gathered from FYW students on our campus. I present the results of this study in the form of composite characters drawn from participants. The results of this study indicate that informed self-placement models can and should be further theorized from a transfer perspective so as to account for students' dispositions. In the end, this research provides convincing evidence about the relationship between students' dispositions and placement decisions as well as direction for further placement instrument design.

Review of the Literature

Problematizing Models of Placement: From Directed Self-Placement (DSP) to Informed Self-Placement

Ensuring that incoming students enroll in an appropriate university writing course has been a long-standing vexation for writing program administrators. Typically, student placement has relied on either (1) highly efficient but decontextualized national tests, such as the SAT or ACT, or (2) more authentic but extremely laborious placement instruments, such as writing portfolios. Directed self-placement (DSP) originated in response to mounting concerns over the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of these traditional placement procedures (Huot; Jones) as well as widespread dissatisfaction across all stakeholders—students, faculty, and administrators alike—with the use of standardized measures of assessment to socialize students into the university (Blakesley; Royer and Gilles, "Directed"). Moreover, standardized measures of assessment (like the SAT or ACT) are neither valid or reliable as placement instruments; nor were they ever intended to act as the basis for awarding institutional course credit (Estrem, Shepherd, and Duman, "Relentless" 111). "The most effective writing placement systems," argue Estrem, Shepherd, and Duman, "encourage student self-efficacy through engaging them in the placement process" (112). This, ostensibly, was the promise of DSP.

Proponents of DSP argue for its elegant simplicity—its ability to “Do it better, do less” (Royer and Gilles, “The Pragmatist” 55), its high levels of reliability coupled with low costs (Cornell and Newton; Jones), and its ability to imbue agency in students through perceived choice (Pinter and Sims; Royer and Gilles “What Is”). On the surface, it would seem, DSP addresses and resolves many of the issues that have plagued traditional models of student placement. However, DSP was never intended to be a perfect or a prescriptive model, and two important critiques have been recently leveled at DSP instruments as they are usually articulated and enacted. First, the constructs of writing—or beliefs about what is valued in writing and how writing gets done—that are typically represented in DSPs are largely relics of a current-traditional view of composition, and second, the actual amount of student agency allowed by DSP is, at best, questionable. In what follows, I more fully unpack both of these critiques and explore the intersection of placement models and transfer theory before discussing programmatic background and methodology that informs this research.

In order for any given writing assessment to be considered valid and, therefore, be of any practical use, there must be explicit alignment between the framing of writing in the assessment and the aspects of writing that are actually valued by the assessors. DSP should indeed be considered a form of assessment since it asks students to evaluate their ability to write in future scenarios based on prior experiences. Notably, this is a step that Daniel Royer and Roger Giles miss in their contention that the only two variables are the student and the curriculum (2003, “The Pragmatist” 54). Between the student and the curriculum still stands the assessment instrument, stripped down though it may be. Therefore, as Edward White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham argue, it is absolutely essential that placement instruments and procedures “reproduce as nearly as possible the rhetorical situation students would meet in their classes” (40). Important to note also is that this rhetorical situation imperative does not necessitate that a placement instrument require students to *write*, only that it *accurately represents* the writing construct that manifests in the classroom. In most DSP models, writing constructs are often conveyed to students via a self-reflective questionnaire or skills-oriented statements, accompanied at times by writing and reading samples (Cherneckoff; Elbow; Frus; Reynolds). In a longitudinal study investigating the validity of DSP at the University of Michigan, Anne Gere et al. found “DSP questions were not well aligned with the FYW construct of writing because they assessed students on a number of capabilities that were largely irrelevant in FYW” (161). This finding is legitimate cause for concern because it would seem that DSP falls prey to the same ideological disconnect that plagues standardized measures of assessment. However, the value that DSP maintains over national testing instruments is that it is highly flexible and adaptable to local contextualities (Nicolay), thus making it entirely salvageable as a placement model so long as it is attuned to the locally valued constructs of writing.

Just as troublesome as the construct of writing represented by a given DSP is how much—or how little—agency DSP instruments realistically afford students given that placement instruments are intended to *direct* student decisions, and not (necessarily) enable student choice. Originally heralded as the new democratic ideal for placement procedures, the rightful restoration of agency and self-determination to the student (Royer & Gilles, “The Pragmatist” 61), DSP has ironically been criticized for engendering at best a reductive reading of choice and at worst a false narrative about agency (Ketai). Empowering students is, of course, a worthwhile pursuit, but simply presenting students with a wide berth of information and leaving them to their own devices does not, or should not, be equated with romantic notions of enfranchisement. On the contrary, the more likely scenario is it is *irresponsible* for writing program administrators to ask first-time university students to shoulder such a load without support—that it “*disempowers* students by asking them [students] to make a judgement without the benefit of expertise” (Nicolay 43). A more responsible administrative practice would be to construct a placement apparatus that ensures that the information provided can be put to *practical and deliberate use by students*. We need to ensure, in other words, “that the choices [offered] are received as intended, and that information is readily available and consistent” (Bedore and Rossen-Knill 71). This revised placement model has been coined Informed Self-Placement (ISP). An ISP instrument as articulated by Pamela Bedore and Deborah Rossen-Knill differs from traditional DSP instruments in that it is *non-directive*; that is, it does not use the student’s responses on a questionnaire to make a value judgment *for* the student. Rather, the ISP instrument’s intent is to provide the incoming student with rich institutional information so that she, the student, can make a placement decision *for herself*. To this end, an ISP is highly attuned to providing students with rich and accurate *institutional* information. The guiding assumption within an ISP model is that, given the appropriate amount of information (about the university, that is), a student will be empowered to make an informed choice.

However, the reality is that choice in general, but particularly with regard to placement, is “a complex rhetorical act” (Lewiecki-Wilson 165). While an informed self-placement is a productive development from directed self-placement, I argue that current articulations of ISP instruments are still incomplete because they continue to conceive of the relationship between choice and information from an institutional perspective; that is, the ISP instrument is concerned with giving information *to* the student. But student placement decisions are, I contend, more complex than simply making more information available to them. I recognize that there are many complicating factors that can play into students’ decision to place into or out of a given university writing course. Moreover, we ought to use research on these nuances to guide our thinking about how to best design an ISP. Two such complicating elements that unequivocally influence student choice within an ISP but have heretofore been under-examined are knowledge transfer and student dispositions. This is not to say, obviously, that transfer and student dispositions have gone untheorized in

composition studies, but rather that the full import of these related fields of research has not been brought to bear in an administrative capacity.

Placement as Transfer

There is no shortage of scholarship pertaining to writing-related notions of transfer; however, these conversations have largely been confined to the classroom and framed as pedagogical concerns (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick; Beach; Moore; Nowacek; Robertson, Taczak, and Yancy; Wardle). While, the writing-related research is indeed diverse, it has yet to be well-theorized for uses outside of instruction or in writing program administration. The paucity of administrative application for transfer is admittedly surprising given that placement is, at perhaps its most basic, a problem of transfer. “Into which class,” a student must ask, “will my prior experiences best transfer?” In order to provide appropriate support in the facilitation of this transfer, ISP could benefit greatly from integrating some lessons learned from pedagogy-minded transfer. For example, there is a general consensus in transfer theory that metacognition is “a key link to students’ ability to develop the knowledges required for success when repurposed in other writing contexts” (Taczak and Robertson). So, an ISP model should be designed with the intention of not only informing students about the constructs of writing they will encounter, but it necessarily must also be deeply dialogic. It ought to be intentionally developed so as to encourage “high-road” transfer, thus fostering a meaningful conversation about the students’ past, present, and future writing selves.

Moreover, it is not enough for students to think declaratively about the intersections of their prior and future writing experiences, they must exhibit procedural knowledge in order to put that metacognition to effective, decision-making use between two dissonant constructs of writing (i.e. high school writing and university-level writing). To this point, Angela Rounsaville is worth citing at length:

[T]ransfer means more than just the ability to apply one textual convention or strategy to another, dissimilar type. Rather, it implies . . . that identities, ways of knowing, goals, and emotions all play a role in how writers move between genres. More importantly, it shows how these extra-textual aspects of uptake are not additions to genre knowledge, but rather deeply intertwined with how and why writers make sense of and act as they do at genre convergences. (para. 24)

In other words, students’ placement decisions vis-à-vis knowledge transfer are more than acts of cognition; they are, again, highly complex rhetorical acts which encompass a myriad of elements beyond the availability of information. Embedded, but largely ignored, in the socio-academic milieu of a student’s placement decision are dispositional considerations. Only recently has research begun to examine the relationship between transfer and dispositions, which is

ironic given that the Council for Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project collaborated in 2011 to endorse eight “Habits of Mind” essential for success in postsecondary writing.

This review of the research, then, reveals a scarcity of scholarship related to transfer and dispositions (Driscoll and Wells; McCune and Entwistle; Perkins et al.), and even then, much like transfer, the discussion is framed as a matter of pedagogy, not administration. Rare though it may be, the research on dispositions and transfer is exceptionally relevant for the development of a productive ISP. As Driscoll and Wells unequivocally state, “dispositions matter—generative dispositions, like a student’s willingness to self-regulate or to positively value writing, will assist in their ability to transfer knowledge” (para. 43). Furthermore, the importance of accounting for the affective power of students’ dispositions is amplified when we consider that not only do dispositions affect transfer in the immediate, but students’ initially-formulated dispositions continue to hold sway in how students assign value to a given task later in their academic endeavors (Wigfield and Eccles 78). So, dispositions will also significantly affect the value they assign to future writing scenarios and, subsequently, their willingness to engage with writing. Dispositions, it would seem then, are of extreme consequence and are thus worthy of careful administrative attention.

The literature shows that there is strong evidence, in theory, for a meaningful connection between students’ placement decisions and the role of dispositions therein. What is missing is concrete evidence of this relationship, concrete evidence that students’ placement decisions involve more than making an informed choice. I posit that a more comprehensive representation of placement understands it to be an act of transfer, and as such, placement instruments should not only inform students about their curricular choices, but the placement instrument itself would be informed *about the students using it*. What is needed is research directed at uncovering in more specific ways how the “informed” aspect of an ISP could cut both ways, more evidence about how and why a placement instrument could be informed about students as much as it informs students about their potential courses. In the follow section, I discuss some of the programmatic changes to the FYW program that provided the exigence for our thinking about student dispositions and placement models.

Programmatic Background

At the time of this writing, the FYW program I co-administered was in the middle of fully instituting sweeping changes to the form, structure, and content of its curriculum as the result of a multi-year, university-wide general education renewal process. Chief among those changes was a shift away from a traditional two-course, FYW sequence to a more vertical curriculum structure: a one-semester required writing course during students’ freshman year followed by

a second, one-semester required course during their sophomore year (or after they complete at least 24 hours of college-level credit).

These programmatic changes are significant for several reasons. First, I believe the move to a two-year course sequence is beneficial for students because it stretches explicit writing instruction further into students' academic careers. However, this same stretch is not without its own issues. Importantly, a student who enters our university with credit for WRIT 1301 (the first required, general education writing course) could conceivably not take a university writing course until the spring semester of sophomore year (or even last semester senior year) since the only temporal requirement for a student's enrollment in WRIT 2302 is their completion of 24 credit hours. This represents a potential gap of at least one and half years before this student officially encounters our institution's formal writing instruction if they enter with credit for WRIT 1301. Complicating the situation further is the closely aligned vertical structure and content of the new two-course sequence. The previous curricular progression between WRIT 1301 and 2302 was rather tenuous and there was little consistency of deliverable content across sections. As a program director, I joked, only half-heartedly, that on the continuum between teacher-proof curriculum and well-intentioned bedlam, the FYW program lived precariously close to the latter. The revised curriculum, however, directly addressed issues of consistency between courses by restructuring WRIT 1301 and 2302 (previously WRIT 2302) out of a horizontal relationship and into vertical alignment.

To explain, the former connection between the courses was largely skills-and-outcomes based, meaning WRIT 2302 was functionally an opportunity for students to continue fine-tuning many of the same types of skills introduced via WRIT 1301. There was not necessarily a scaffolded progression of *ideas* between the courses. Under the revised learning outcomes, the two courses are connected at deep structural levels, and WRIT 2302 builds from complex *ideas* about writing, not writing and researching *skills*, presented in WRIT 1301². In effect, students now move *up* the curriculum into new concepts instead of across it. Students' ability to succeed in WRIT 2302 is more closely related to the conceptual foundations that constitute WRIT 1301. Moreover, the structural realignment also necessitated that the content of each course be revised. The skills-oriented writing construct that encouraged well-intentioned curricular bedlam would no longer hold water in a vertically aligned course sequence. Students from different sections needed to be able to bring reasonably similar foundations about writing constructs from WRIT 1301 into WRIT 2302. I therefore endeavored to bring the deliverable content of the courses more closely in line to each other. This is not to say that the programmatic pendulum swung completely over to teacher-proof curriculum, but I wanted a consistency of experience and

² Specifically, the content of our new writing curriculum pulls from threshold concepts about writing as articulated in *Naming What I Know*, writing about writing pedagogy (WAW), and Teaching for Transfer (TFT) theories of writing developed by Kathleen B. Yancey, Kara Taczak, and Liane Robertson.

content across sections and between courses. Moreover, my intention has not been to demean our prior curriculum, since I did administer and teach inside it myself after all. Instead, my intention has been to show how drastically our writing curriculum has changed as a matter of timing and content, both of which bear relevance to instruction as well as program administration.

These curricular changes, of course, affected pedagogy, but I was also worried about the impact of these changes on our administrative structures as well, particularly with regard to issues of student placement. Historically, placement procedures for FYW at our institution have depended on nationally normed standardized test scores, which is a polite way of admitting that we had no real placement instrument. Research in placement methodology suggests only a nominal correlation between standardized measures of assessment and student success in FYW courses, and the use of standardized tests for placement has likewise been critiqued for being inattentive to local particularities. Therefore, the lack of a real placement instrument was concerning even under the old curriculum, but these anxieties were exacerbated once I began implementing the new, revised writing curriculum. Anecdotal evidence from our pilot courses of the new FYW curriculum suggested that students found the new WRIT 1301 content to be unlike anything they had experienced before.

However, students who entered with credit for WRIT 1301, like Caitlyn, appeared to be highly resistant, adverse even, to the idea that WRIT 1301 or even WRIT 2302 had something of value to offer them because it was unlike their previous coursework. This resistance to the curriculum was disconcerting because these same students seemed often to be the ones struggling the most with the new course content. My experience as an instructor suggested that these students' prior dispositions about writing were a factor in how they received, or resisted, our course content and pedagogy. As a program administrator, however, I likewise began to wonder if these dispositions might also bear relevance on students' potential placement decisions. The ways the new course content was being received by students combined with the delay of WRIT 2302 until students' sophomore year prompted us to consider whether students' dispositions did affect their placement decisions, and how, if at all, a placement instrument could be designed to account for those dispositions. Again, as my review of the literature indicates, there was a theoretical connection between placement and students' dispositions, but I wanted concrete evidence of this relationship.

Methods

I utilized a qualitative approach to carry out our research study that included conducting two focus group sessions and two intensive, individual student interviews. Additionally, I applied a phenomenological structure (Bevan) to the interview process in order to gather rich descriptions about students' placement decisions. A phenomenological interview structure involved having participants, first, contextualize their placement decision. Then, participants were asked to

provide a descriptive explanation for placing into or out of a given required writing course. Finally, participants were given an opportunity to clarify their placement decisions. This method of interviewing “enables a researcher to examine a person’s experience both actively and methodically” and “provides a sound basis for interpreting experience grounded in the origin of the material” (Bevan 143). Such an interview structure allowed for the elicitation of complex but rich descriptions of placement decisions from participants. (For full list of the interview protocol see Appendix A).

Participants

Following IRB approval, I began the recruitment of participants. Since this research was focused on how students’ placement decisions could potentially be affected by their dispositions, I needed to gather interview data specifically from students whose academic history enabled them to speak to this particular interaction. In other words, it was imperative that our sampling strategy be purposeful in order to obtain the required dataset. I therefore employed a cell sampling strategy which would enable us to appropriately apprehend the phenomenon under investigation (Robinson 33). In order to obtain a representative sample, I identified three distinct academic criteria for potential participants.

Participant Group A (4 students): Those who entered without any credit for a required course who enrolled in a WRIT 1301 section taught under the revised or the existing curriculum.

Participant Group B (8 students): Students who entered with credit for a required course and who still opted to enroll in a WRIT 1301 section taught under the revised curriculum, or students who entered with credit for a FYW course and who opted out of WRIT 1301 and enrolled in a WRIT 2302 section taught under the revised or existing curriculum.

Participant Group C (2 students): Students who re-enrolled in a WRIT 2302 section taught under the revised curriculum because they were unsuccessful during their first attempt (including but not limited to self- or instructor-initiated withdrawal, withdrawal for absences, or non-passing grade of F or NP).

Collectively, these participant subpopulations represent a sample universe that is homogeneous enough to effectively isolate the academic interaction I wanted to examine while also providing a diverse range of students’ initial experiences and contact across the FYW program. Participant Groups B and C all were subjected to a placement decision: “Do I enroll in WRIT 1301 or 2302?” Moreover, they experienced the effects of placement decisions in a variety of ways, which I discuss in more detail in the following section. The first subpopulation of students, Participant Group A, represents a control group of students who were

not affected by existing placement procedures, since they did not have credit and thus did not have the option to make a placement choice. This student group could, however, speak to their experiences in the FYW program so as to help establish a baseline for the ways in which students were navigating the new, revised curriculum.

Recruiting students who met the criteria for Participant Groups B and C was imperative, since their academic history included the specific phenomena (placement) relevant to this study. In order to recruit participants from these specific subpopulations, I identified students who had made a placement decision using the university registrar (information available for our use under FERPA 34 CFR § 99.31). I proceeded to source our sample using study advertisement techniques. I then contacted students who met the criteria for Participant Groups B and C via email, allowing them to self-select into our research study at their own discretion. In order to recruit participants from Participant Group A, I visited each section of FYW taught in Spring 2018 at our university and again invited students to self-select into our research study via a flyer and short explanation of our study. All the participants in this research study, therefore, were recruited on a strictly volunteer basis.

In total, 14 students elected to participate in this research study: 4 students from Participant Group A, 8 students from Participant Group B, and 2 students from Participant Group C. This sample size was appropriate to satisfy the needs for idiographic research intents and enabled us to develop cross-case generalities formed from an intensive analysis of each participant (Robinson and Smith 174).

Data Collection

My data was gathered through focus groups and individual interviews. I conducted two focus groups with students from Participant Groups A and B. Four students participated in each focus group, and the meetings lasted approximately one hour each. The objective in these groups was to generate crosstalk and productive discussion in order to capture a variety of perspectives, not necessarily generate a consensus of opinion (Petty et al.; Robinson); therefore, I worked to formulate groups that distributed students' experiences as evenly as possible. Furthermore, following Michael Patton and Jenny Kitzinger, I also structured our focus groups around open-ended questions that would provide the necessary room for participants to narrate rich descriptions and elucidate their experiences with placement. As a researcher, I sought to background my role and act instead as a facilitator of the discussion, intervening when necessary in order to redirect the conversation and ensure that all voices were given equal opportunity to be heard.

I also conducted two individual interviews with students who were identified as Participant Group C. These interviews lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Participants in group C were only allowed to participate in individual interviews

due to their prior history of withdrawing from or failing WRIT 2302. Individual interviewees were asked the same questions as those asked of focus group participants to ensure I was gathering similar data points from all participants. However, as Michael Bassey posits, some interviewee responses may be influenced by fear or their academic positionality in relation to the researcher (81). I was especially attuned to this possibility with participants in group C given their academic performance in WRIT 2302. I therefore worked to mitigate this by ensuring the comfort of the two individual interviewees. I stressed to these participants that I only wanted to get a comprehensive view of their experience, not judge their decisions and experiences (Silverman).

All the focus groups and individual interviews followed a semi-structured design (Creswell; Robson), and participants were asked to discuss their secondary education writing experiences and their dispositions about writing that resulted therefrom, their confidence as writers entering into the university, their beliefs about placement, their expected experiences in a FYW course, and their lived experiences in a FYW course. As aforementioned, my interview and focus group protocol loosely followed a phenomenological structure wherein I first asked participants to contextualize their placement decision by narrating their prior experiences in secondary education. I then asked a series of questions intended to apprehend their reasons for making a given placement decision. Finally, the interview questions circled back and asked participants to clarify their reasoning with regard to placement.

All the focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis purposes. The audio recordings were transcribed individually by the principal investigator using Microsoft Word and then reviewed and checked for accuracy. In total, this research produced 65 pages of transcripts.

Data Coding and Composite Characters

Following transcription, I began using nVivo to code participants' responses. My analysis of participants data was recursive and iterative, drawing from a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss). I began by independently identifying open, inductive starter codes for participants experiences based on the transcripts of participants responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I then cross-checked the initial codes against each other and against the existing literature on transfer and placement in order to further condense and categorize the data. A second round of coding in nVivo was then conducted wherein the themes of "linear" and "liminal" student dispositions were identified.

In brief, a student with a linear disposition views writing instruction, and by extension placement decisions, in non-recursive ways. For example, consider the participant who described her history of writing history thusly: "All writing was is figuring out how are you going to take what you learned in this course and apply it to the end of course exam, which is going to determine whether or not you

make it to the next grade or not.” For this student, writing amounted to passing a standardized test, checking off boxes that would allow her to proceed to the next set of check-able boxes about writing in the following grade. Their linear habitus prevents her from seeing any value in taking a course for which she “already has credit,” such as WRIT 1301.

Conversely, a student who embodies a liminal perspective approaches her placement decision in a much more iterative fashion; that is, she is able to identify potential gaps between her prior knowledge and her present situation. A liminal student is much more recursive. An instance of liminal thinking is found in this response from another study participant, who, explaining her placement decision, said, “I had a credit from my AP English exam from senior year, but I still chose to sort of start baseline just to get a feel for the school. And I actually am glad that I did that, because it gave me a second to be like, wait, this writing might be different.” Here, the student acknowledges that there might be an incongruity between her history and the current writing situation.

Following the second round of coding, a third round of coding was conducted to generate composite characters of the two dispositional habituses identified across study participants. A composite character is an empirical, but nevertheless fictional, persona that is directly grounded in real data provided by participants' lived experiences (Solorzano and Yasso). Thus, the composite character is not truly “fictional,” but rather is a rigorous methodological practice that draws together data patterns that are located in and across individual data points. Moreover, researcher bias in the generation of the characters—while admittedly unavoidable—is held in check as the voices used to construct it are real, not fictional. Composite characters have found purchase as a methodological tool in critical race theories precisely because, as April Baker-Bell contends, they “allow researchers to merge data analysis with creative writing to expose patterns of racialized inequality and deepen our understanding of . . . the lived experiences of people of color *as individuals and as groups* in schools” (44, emphasis added). The key point about composite characters that critical race theorists like Baker-Bell and Daniella Cook make is that they are able to speak to both a collective experience and, in this case, the cumulative impact that dispositions can have on students' placement decisions. Importantly, composite characters are not meant to detract from individual or differentiated experience; instead, “the use of composite characters turns the focus from individual participants to the larger issues faced by groups” (Cook 182). Therefore, the voices of Caitlyn and Gabriella that follow narrate two distinct patterns of student dispositions—linear and liminal—that affected students' understanding of and orientation toward placement.

Character Matters: Linear and Liminal Dispositions

As a lens for explicating our findings related to the highly complex topic of students' dispositions, I have drawn two composite character profiles derived

from participants involved in this study. These profiles were drawn exclusively from students identified as Student Group B. Students who entered *with* course credit and accepted their credit and enrolled in WRIT 2302 are represented by Caitlyn. Students who forewent their credit and enrolled in a section of WRIT 1301 taught using the revised curriculum are represented by Gabriella. My analysis of participants' responses in this subgroup revealed that students who enter the university with credit for a required writing course, either through AP test credit or dual enrollment course credit, generally embody a dispositional habitus that exists along a continuum between linear and liminal.

In many ways, Caitlyn and Gabriella are very similar. Their secondary educations were both marked by a rigorous curriculum of Advanced Placement courses. Because of these shared experiences, both have a shallow understanding of writing as primarily test oriented. What's more, both Caitlyn and Gabriella are accustomed to putting this functional understanding of writing to good academic use. They have both figured out "how to work" the system, how to "find what the teacher or test is looking for and give it to them." Subsequently, they both generally earn good grades. All their prior experiences, in short, have led each to be fairly confident in themselves—both in general and as writers specifically. If you asked Caitlyn to rank her confidence level as a writer coming into the university, she'd tell you "a solid eight." Gabriella might waffle between a six and an eight on the same question, but she's not far off, if at all, from the confidence that Caitlyn exhibits. Importantly, these two students both have a common expectation about the required university writing course: they both expect to experience a writing construct that is "more of the same." As a matter of prior experience, as a matter of practicality, and as a matter of *cognition*, Caitlyn and Gabriella are strikingly alike.

However, the principle point of divergence between Caitlyn and Gabriella begins to emerge in their decision about what to do with the writing course credit they've earned prior to enrollment. Caitlyn opts to use her AP test credit and enroll in WRIT 2302, the second course in the revised two-course sequence. Gabriella chooses to forego her AP test credit and enroll in WRIT 1301, a course she did *not* need to complete. Again, Gabriella, like her counterpart Caitlyn, believes that WRIT 1301 is going to be an extension of the types of writing to which she is accustomed (and for which she already has university credit), so she is not *cognitively* expecting this course to offer her anything new. Why, then, did she choose, in her words, to "step back," seemingly, into this course? I would not necessarily agree that a choice to "re-take" WRIT 1301 is a step back, especially if the course content differs from a student's prior experience, but the larger issue, this research suggests, is that this student's decision lies, at least in part, in her *liminal* disposition.

A liminal disposition can be characterized as an affective habit of mind that is marked by a recognition of the self as incomplete, coupled with a perception of learning that is recursive. Indeed, the eight habits of mind outlined in the

Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing privilege a dispositional approach to learning grounded in liminality, likely because the developers all approach learning to write as a lifelong endeavor. This mindset differentiates Gabriella from Caitlyn. Gabriella's explanation of why she decided to enroll in WRIT 1301 is worth detailing at length:

I figured that I should take it again because it would be beneficial to me, even if it was something I'd already done. Like, it wouldn't hurt to relearn some of the stuff because I felt at that point maybe I was slipping a little and I had a little bit of self-doubt. I was confident coming into it [the university] but I was also a little bit not. Because you would get checked a little bit [in high school] with the fact that you don't always know what you're doing really.

Gabriella's prior experiences, her own cognition, and even the university placement system itself are all telling her that she doesn't *need* to take WRIT 1301. But perhaps counterintuitively, she feels that "it wouldn't hurt to relearn some of the stuff." Her answer substantiates a dispositional outlook that is recursive and not-yet-complete. Liminal. The prime driver behind her decision is not her thinking, but her attitude. Also important is that her liminal disposition allows her, even requires her, to view her placement decision as a point of uncertainty, an unsettled matter of inquiry. The very possibility for a decision to even exist is predicated on the presence of uncertainty (Dewey; Royer and Giles "The Pragmatist"). It sounds intuitive, but it is a linchpin to understanding why students who embody a liminal disposition are able to actually conceptualize the placement decision as, in fact, an actual decision—a move that those who embody a non-recursive, linear disposition, like Caitlyn, are unable to make.

Royer and Giles rightly argue that the foundation of any effective placement instrument is its ability to "displace belief long enough for students to consider fresh the new situation they are about to encounter as writers in our program" ("The Pragmatist" 59). Students like Caitlyn, whose dispositions are linear, are unable to independently understand the placement decision as an "indeterminate situation"; rather, *there is no decision to make*. A linear disposition frames learning as a rigid, lock-step progression of skills-based competencies: once a box has been checked, there is no reason to revisit it. Therefore, unlike Gabriella, Caitlyn is unable to locate any value in "relearning" something like WRIT 1301, a set of competencies she has credit for learning. It is no accident that Caitlyn is unable to view WRIT 1301 as anything other than, in her words, "rudimentary." For Caitlyn, and students whose dispositions are linear, the situation is firmly settled. The only choice is to opt into the higher course. As Caitlyn explains:

I didn't take 1301 because I didn't have to, so I didn't want to. I thought it [WRIT 1301] was just a joke. This would be a waste of my time. What is going to be different from how I was taught in junior and senior year in high school? It would be a waste of my time. If you come in with sufficient

experience, it's more beneficial to just jump into these upper-level courses as opposed to taking remedial Gen Ed writing requirements. Writing is an intuitive thing anyway.

Based on her explanation of her placement decision, it is evident that placement was always already a foregone conclusion for Caitlyn. She wasn't required to enroll in this course, so she simply wasn't going to. Furthermore, I actually agree with Caitlyn when she says that taking WRIT 1301 would be a "waste of time," *if*, that is, she was able to demonstrate that she was indeed prepared for the higher level, revised curriculum. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Caitlyn withdrew and/or was dropped from WRIT 2302 in consecutive semesters during her first year on our campus.³ Clearly her prior experiences had *not* well prepared her for the new curriculum; however, the more salient point here is that the dispositional habitus she embodied—her linear perspective—prevented her from even seeing how WRIT 1301 was indeed a departure from her AP credit and thus would have been valuable for her. Her linearity occulted the choice for her. This research suggests that Caitlyn's inability—or refusal—to (1) conceive of placement as an actual choice and (2) ascertain any worth in taking a course for which she already had credit results, in part, from how a student with a linear disposition assigns and understands value. Cognitively, Caitlyn ought to have been able to see that WRIT 2302 *wasn't* "remedial" based on her inability to twice complete the course; by most academic measures, she should have been able to determine that this course, even though she had credit for it, still had something of value to offer.

Furthermore, it was not as though a paucity of information led Caitlyn to believe that WRIT 1301 would not have been of any value for her; she indeed had, of her own accord, collected and reflected on the information about the writing courses on campus. In her own words:

I had heard from people, based on talking to professors and based on reading the description of the course [WRIT 1301] itself. I had many conversations with many different people about it [WRIT 1301]. Based on those conversations about what I would be learning and the kinds of materials that I would be studying... that in and of itself taught me I'm not going to learn anything from this writing course. In talking to even professors and talking to heads of departments...no one was able to give me any insight as to how I would be growing as a writer, how this class would be different.

Caitlyn's inability to fully apprehend her placement decision—informed as she was—lends credibility to the observation that there is more at stake here than just the availability of information. That is, again, students' placement decisions

³ Again, it is important to remember that Caitlyn is a composite character, a narrative example of a collective—not individual—experience. Some students who embodied a linear habitus did *not* end up withdrawing from their WRIT 1301 course, but many did.

appear to be more than matters of cognition. Even though our institution didn't have an official placement instrument (aside from standardized test scores) in place, Caitlyn still was thoroughly informed about the writing courses available on campus.

In other words, Caitlyn was well informed about her placement decision. She was quite astute and thorough in gathering information about her placement decision. She went to all the right places and spoke to all the right people to gather information about WRIT 1301, and what's more, the information she received usually indicated that she *should* take WRIT 1301. In her interview she admitted that at multiple times, she was told that "I [the university] want you to learn about writing on our campus because it's different." But despite the wealth of information and apparent directive advice, she still was unable to perceive any potential value in "retaking" WRIT 1301. For her, the value of credit for WRIT 1301 far outstripped any value that she might have gained by enrolling in WRIT 1301. Caitlyn's testimony indicates that a placement instrument focused solely on providing the student with accurate information will still not be enough to aid them in making the best choice. Again, I contend that this is because placement decisions are highly complex rhetorical moments of transfer. In order to be more efficacious, an informed self-placement instrument would also need to be attuned to students' dispositions, in particular students who embody a linear disposition.

The question still remains, however: how could such a placement instrument be designed to account for the dispositional habitus students bring with them to the placement decision? One pathway, I contend, is to apply theories of transfer, which have largely heretofore been theorized as a matter of pedagogy, to placement.

Implications for Extending ISP Design

I have thus far been endeavoring to show how placement decisions are more than acts of cognition, that they should be understood instead as acts of transfer. If the placement decision is in fact an act of transfer, then the instrument used to help students make this complex decision must represent the decision as such. Part of transfer theory (Driscoll and Wells; Gere et al; Perkins et al.; Yancey et al.) is the role of prior knowledge and the way it affects students' dispositions. In *Writing Across Contexts*, Kathleen Yancey et al. identify students' prior knowledge as "points of departure, which functioned as a primary point of reference as they [students] began college composition" (105). Far from being value-neutral, however, these prior experiences heavily influence a student's dispositional habitus. Ironically, in some cases students whose writerly identities have been represented positively, students who view themselves as "good" writers, are unwilling (or unable) to adopt a growth mindset. That is, they are what Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi term "boundary guarders" (314): students, like Caitlyn, whose dispositions are overly linear, thus preventing them from seeing any value in taking a FYW course. These students believe that their prior

high school experiences have sufficiently prepared them to write well at the university.

This “border guarding,” linear disposition clearly bears relevance for students’ placement decisions, yet current theories of ISP almost always neglect to account for the import of students’ informing dispositions. That is, ISP is typically intended to ensure that students are provided “information [that] is readily available and consistent across the college” (Bedore and Rossen-Knill 71). Very rarely, if ever, are placement instruments intended to get students to question and critically examine their prior and informing dispositions about writing. Yet transfer theory suggests that it is precisely students’ prior experiences, or points of departure, and beliefs about writing that *need* to be brought into question through a placement instrument. In other words, if Caitlyn had more carefully understood and examined her past and, most importantly, the habits of mind *about* writing that she brought with her to the university, then she might have been able to make a more informed decision about which course is most appropriate for her.

Therefore, one important redesign to the ISP model would be the inclusion of a series of questions that first gets the student to reflect on, interrogate, and openly critique their prior experiences before providing information about future course offerings available to the user. The primary beneficiary of these types of questions would be those students who embody a linear disposition, since students with a more liminal perspective would already be more likely to question their prior experiences and dispositional habitus. Such a series of questions should be interactive and encourage the user to identify and explicitly name their beliefs about writing *as well* as their identities as writers.

For example, students could be asked to productively reflect on their prior experiences by first responding to the prompt, “In the space provided below, describe the type of writing that you were typically asked to complete in high school. Try to identify your *reasons* for writing and some *key terms* which accurately describe how you understand writing.” Students could then be presented with types of writing and some key terminology from their potential university writing courses. Students could then more clearly see where their prior experiences do, or do not, align with their future writing expectations. Another possibility would be to include a survey-element within the placement instrument wherein students respond on a Likert scale to prompts such as “My high school writing courses thoroughly discussed the concept of *kairos* and its role in rhetorical situations.” These types of questions would throw a student’s prior experiences into momentary doubt, thereby disrupting potentially linear habituses which might hinder students’ placement decisions. Such a disruption would answer Royer and Gilles’ aforementioned call to displace students’ established beliefs long enough to see with more clarity the fullness of their placement decision.

Ultimately, this research confirms that developing an effective and authentic informed self-placement instrument is a highly complex endeavor. If a placement instrument is going to actually enfranchise students in their decision making (indeed if it is going to help them see that there is in fact a decision to be made at all), then it absolutely must simultaneously (1) provide students with information about their course options *and* (2) make allowances for the dispositional habitus that students bring with them by encouraging students to examine and productively doubt their prior experiences. One way to accomplish these goals is to extend ISP designs to address both the student's future *and* past experiences. Placement is, after all, often the first consequential contact writing program administrators have with students coming into our universities; as such, we ought to continue to develop procedures and instruments that pay respect to the complexity of this decision as an act of transfer. Such a placement instrument would work to the benefit of both our students and our writing programs.

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