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PREDICTING WRITING ABILITY: THE PLACEMENT TESTING DILEMMA

Thomas L. Franke

Among English teachers few issues are more controversial than those surrounding testing, especially the testing of writing ability. Occasionally, in the midst of the controversy, we forget that tests can serve a variety of purposes. In a 1982 survey of college programs, Rosentene B. Purnell found "Strong resistance to the proliferation of testing...where a test serves as an exclusive criterion for making crucial decisions on a student's advancement to a higher level...." On the other hand, she found that "Placement and/or diagnostic testing...is widely accepted and appears to be on the rise..." (407). One reason placement testing receives wide support is that it is intended to serve the two principal participants in the college English class: faculty by a reduction in the number of unprepared students in their classes, and students by selection of courses that will best meet their individual needs and where their chances of success are high.

Issues in Placement Testing

Although the value of placement testing at the college level is generally accepted, there is no consensus about the best approach to such testing. Purnell found that "despite the studies done by the Educational Testing Service and others...arguing that a test which contains both objective items and an essay has higher reliability and validity than either alone, the profession relies most heavily on the more direct indicator of writing skills, an essay." In fact, "Only 30%...used both an essay and an objective section in their testing program" (408).

One reason no consensus has developed is that emotional reactions to the multiple-choice-versus-essay-testing debate are strong. Yet, as William Lutz observes, "the amount of substantive

research on the relationship between essay tests and multiple-choice tests to assess writing ability has been scarce" (10). Another reason for the lack of consensus in testing is the lack of consensus in teaching. Unlike the public schools, where curricular guides and state or district-wide standardized testing may force some degree of unity on the curriculum (or, as Madaus observes, some external control), most college English departments have few such external constraints. The diversity in college English programs leaves secondary teachers with little guidance in preparing students for their college experiences and virtually assures that some students will arrive at college without the prerequisite skills expected by their instructors.

The key issues facing any college placement testing program include the following:

1. What is the purpose of the test? Is it to identify students for developmental classes, for advanced placement, or for both?
2. What are the expected outcomes of the courses for which the test will place students?
3. What resources are available to implement testing?
4. What test or tests will most accurately predict student performance in the course or courses?

Once answers to questions one to three have been determined, question four becomes the most important one. It is also the one most directly measurable. Unfortunately, as Lutz observes, "Too often, those selecting tests to assess writing base their selection on factors other than the best method of assessment consistent with the purpose of the testing program" (10).

Placement Testing at LCC

At Lansing Community College (LCC), placement testing has been employed for about ten years to identify students who are advised to take developmental courses as well as those who qualify to waive the first freshman composition course. (Students do not, however, receive credit for any courses based on the test.) Furthermore, the college's writing faculty have developed a standard syllabus which stipulates the course objectives, textbooks, and grading criteria for all sections of Composition I. As an open-door college, LCC does not require entrance examinations such as the SAT or the ACT. Therefore, the Writing Program was obliged to conduct its own testing within reasonable limits of time and budget. Typically, testing has been administered by instructors during the first class session of the term. In the summer of 1982, however, we took advantage of an opportunity to pre-test students during an optional, but widely attended, orientation program. The results of that experience provided an opportunity for us to examine the predictive accuracy of our tests.

Testing Procedures

LCC's testing program reflects the guidelines advanced by Fred Godshalk, et al. in 1966. It includes both a multiple-choice test and a writing sample. For the multiple-choice section, the **College English Placement Test (CEPT)** was chosen because it covers matters of prewriting, organization, and style as well as matters of grammar and usage. It was administered according to instructions in the test manual. The writing sample used the following topics:

1. Explain something by means of examples. For instance, you might explain how a college degree helps a person, how reading can change a person's life, or how living in Michigan is good or bad.

2. Compare or contrast two things. For example, you might compare two television shows, two musical groups, or two cities.

Before starting the writing sample, students were told, "You will have thirty minutes to write. Allow a few of those

minutes for planning and a few for proofreading. Do not expect to recopy your paper." Five minutes after the timing had begun, students were told, "If you have not begun writing, plan to do so soon." After twenty-five minutes, students were advised, "You have five minutes. Finish the sentence you are on; then begin proofreading." Testing was administered to 740 students in four sessions by the author with the assistance of several counselors and student aides. Only those students who subsequently took the courses of interest in this study are included in the analysis that follows.

Scoring Procedures

CEPT tests were scored by computer. Writing samples were evaluated by a team of LCC writing faculty using the following criteria which were designed to correspond to our course sequence. A score of five indicated advanced placement (Writing 131), while a four indicated readiness for freshman composition (Writing 121). A three indicated a need for a Spelling Improvement course (Communication 035), a two corresponded to a Grammar and Mechanics course (Writing 102), and a one suggested Fundamentals of Composition (Writing 102).

Essay Score

Essay Traits

1	Fifty words or less
2	Three or more error points
3	Three or more spelling errors
4	Fewer than three spelling errors, fewer than three error points, average organization and fluency
5	Fewer than three spelling errors, fewer than three error points, good organization and fluency

Error points were defined by a locally developed system which assigned three error points to an unintelligible sentence,

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two error points to an ineffective comma splice or fragment, and one error point to errors in agreement, tense, or punctuation. After writing samples were scored, faculty combined the results with CEPT scores according to formulas that were developed from observations and data collected over several years.

Analysis

Analysis was performed by computer using the stepwise method in the SPSS-X multiple regression program. A number of variables were examined, but in the interest of brevity and clarity, only those that proved statistically significant in one or more tests will be presented and discussed here. These are the variables:

1. Writing sample: Score on the writing sample described above.

2. CEPT Right: Number of questions, out of 106, answered correctly on the CEPT test.

3. CEPT Right-Wrong: Number of questions right minus the number of questions wrong on the CEPT test.

4. RPS: Score on Carver's **Reading Progress Scale**, a brief test designed to identify students with serious reading deficiencies.

In the analysis, students are divided into three groups:

1. Those who took Composition I

2. Those who took a developmental course (Fundamentals of Composition, Grammar and Mechanics of Writing, or Spelling Improvement)

3. Those who took both a developmental writing course and Spelling Improvement. (Note that this group is a subcategory of group two.)

Only those who received qualitative grades in the courses of interest are considered. Students who withdrew or received grades of incomplete are not included.

Results

Composition I Students. As Table 1 shows, the best predictor of student grades in Composition I is the writing sample. The next best predictor is CEPT Right-Wrong. Taken together, these two variables explain about 13% of the

variation in students' grades.

Table 1
Summary of Regression
on Composition I Grades

Step/Factor	Multiple R	R ²	F/Significance	d.f.
1/Writing Sample	.299	.089	30.535/.000	1,312
2/CEPT Right-Wrong	.362	.131	23.447/.000	2,311

Developmental Course Students. Table 2 indicates that the most effective prediction of student grades for the three developmental courses, taken in combination, is CEPT Right-Wrong. This variable explains approximately 10% of the variation in students' grades.

Table 2
Summary of Regression on
Developmental Course Grades

Step/Factor	Multiple R	R ²	F/Significance	d.f.
1/CEPT Right-Wrong	.314	.099	9.107/.003	1,83

Developmental Writing and Spelling Students. For that sub-group that took Spelling Improvement concurrently with one of the two developmental writing courses, CEPT Right is the most effective predictor, followed by the **Reading Progress Scale**. Together, they explain about one-third of the variation in these students' developmental writing course grades. (Note that the writing course grade, not the spelling course grade, is the predicted grade.)

Table 3
Summary of Regression on
Developmental Writing Grades
with Concurrent Spelling Enrollment

Step/Factor	Multiple R	R ²	F/Significance	d.f.
1/CEPT Right	.488	.238	18.415/.000	1,59
2/Reading Progress	.590	.349	15.513/.000	2,58

Discussion

Composition I Students. In many placement testing situations, including ours at LCC, the main concern is to predict the likelihood of success in the first freshman level course. With adequate predictions, those students who are unlikely to succeed can be advised or required to take an appropriate developmental course. At the same time, those who are predicted to do extremely well may be offered advanced placement. The writing sample proved most effective in predicting success in Composition I, but CEPT Right-Wrong contributed to the prediction as well.

The effectiveness of the writing sample in this particular case may result from the fact that it was scored according to criteria derived from the course itself. Although the writing sample took more time to score, it was actually more efficient to administer than the CEPT from a student perspective. It took only one-half hour of each student's time, whereas the CEPT took almost twice that amount. The fact that CEPT Right-Wrong was superior to CEPT Right suggests that useful information was provided by students' wrong answers on the multiple-choice test. The correlation of CEPT Right-Wrong with the Writing Sample was a mere .38, slightly higher than the correlation Bamberg found between a "35-item objective examination on usage and sentence structure" and holistic essay scores, but still lending support to her claim that the two types of test "measure quite different skills" (405). However, this study shows that at least part of whatever the CEPT measures does contribute to predicting success in a writing course in which at least 80% of the grade is based on student essays.

From one perspective, the results for Composition I students are disappointing. The multiple r^2 or .13 is low, indicating that there are other sources of variance that should be discovered. On the other hand, only 2.4% of the students whom we advised to take Composition I and who completed the course failed it, in contrast to a 4.3% failure rate among students who defied our recommendation and took Composition I. This difference is not statistically significant, however. Unfor-

tunately, one question is unanswered by this research: Had we not tested at all, what would the failure rate have been?

These results suggest that our best approach in the future would be to seek improvements in our writing sample procedures. Perhaps a longer sample or one with different topics would prove superior. Certainly we should try testing with multiple graders, and we might refine our scoring procedures in order to extract more information from the samples. Another possibility would be to collect two samples, perhaps tapping different composing strategies. Some of these changes would cost, both in time and in money, but savings might be achieved by abandoning the CEPT test altogether, particularly if the new procedures could be shown to enhance prediction above the contribution provided by the CEPT.

Developmental Students. At first it may seem surprising that CEPT Right-Wrong contributed more than other variables to prediction of grades in the three developmental courses. However, the placement system was designed to identify success in Composition I. Furthermore, the three developmental courses vary in their emphases, and only one, Fundamentals of Composition, stresses the writing process. The other two, Grammar and Mechanics of Writing and Spelling Improvement, focus on specific skill areas. Generally, the measures used here are not adequate predictors of success in these courses as a group. CEPT Right-Wrong may measure some general language skills related to success in the developmental courses, but it may also tap some of the specific skills of grammar, mechanics and spelling that developmental students can avoid in writing samples. CEPT Right-Wrong may have potential for helping determine which developmental course a student should take. The writing sample, as employed here, does not offer that potential.

Developmental Writing Plus Spelling Students. Using the measures examined here, prediction was best for students who took one of the two developmental writing courses and the spelling improvement course. About one-third of the variance in their grades in the developmental writing courses can be explained by CEPT Right

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and the **Reading Progress Scale**. Of the sixty students studied in this subgroup, only four took Spelling Improvement based on the recommendation derived from our assessment of their writing sample. Probably most took the course because it is required by certain business curricula offered by LCC's Department of Accounting and Office Programs. Included are programs such as secretarial training, word processing, and court reporting. It is not immediately obvious why a multiple-choice test such as the CEPT and a reading test would be strong predictors of this particular group's performance in developmental writing courses.

Conclusions

The placement test data examined here suggest some intriguing possibilities and some perplexing problems. The relative

success of the writing sample in predicting Composition I grades indicates that it is a strong candidate for further development. The fact that it is superior to the CEPT, a multiple-choice test with a reasonable claim as a broad-based measure of writing ability, reinforces the notion that writing samples can be effective placement devices. The CEPT has its merits, however. Not only does it supplement the writing sample in predicting Composition I grades, it is more effective in predicting success in developmental courses. The fact that different measures are effective with certain subgroups of students is a good reminder that biases for or against particular testing formats do not lead to effective advising of students. Careful analysis should be the basis of decisions about which test or tests to use, and, in placement testing, successful prediction should be the measure of a test's value.

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