

**First-Year Writing Portfolio Assessment Project**  
Academic Year 2007/2008  
Final Report

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**Overview**

In the fall of 2006, the composition faculty in the English Department revised our first-year writing program in three significant ways:

1. We changed our placement mechanism from using the English Placement Test (EPT) to a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) model (Royer, Gilles), where students, with direction from the composition program, advisors, and mentors, make their own placement decision.
2. We created three options for students to choose from to meet their first-year writing requirement: English 10: Accelerated Academic Literacy; English 5A/5B: Academic Literacy I & II, a two-semester sequence; and Linguistics 6: Advanced English Strategies for Multilingual Speakers and then English 5A/5B.
3. We implemented a large-scale portfolio reading where students would create portfolios of their best work and two teachers, who are not the students' own, read and assess student portfolios. English 5A teachers read student portfolios together, and English 5B and English 10 teachers read each other's student portfolios together.

In particular, the composition faculty wanted students who finished English 10 and English 5A/5B to meet the same set of outcomes, as they could be demonstrated through their portfolios. Our assessment research was to collect and compare final portfolios from the first joint reading with English 10 and English 5B to see if students were able to finish each option with similar sets of abilities with writing.

**Methodology**

We collected 120 portfolios from 10 teachers' classes, 5 from English 10 and 5 from English 5B, who agreed to be a part of this research. These portfolios were then read again and coded for particular outcomes that could be assessed in the portfolios that students turned in. These outcomes were broken down into seven categories (please see the full set of outcomes in Appendix A): 1) Joining Academic Conversations, 2) Language Use, 3) Reading Engagement, 4) Reflection, 5) Research, 6) Writing Process, and 7) Writing Rhetorically.

Using Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, Gee), we looked for students' work to speak for itself; that is, we agreed to read student portfolios as description of course outcomes, not necessary as some sort of "evidence" of students "right" or "wrong" demonstration of the outcomes. This allowed us to consider the qualitative nature of what students' produced so that we could use that information to inform our curriculum, pedagogy, and portfolio reading sessions.

## Results

Though there were interesting comparisons between English 5B and 10 students in all seven of the categories, the results that seemed most important were the ones from Joining Academic Conversations, Language Use, Reflection, and Research.

- Joining Academic Conversations: In general, first-year writing students had not, until now, thought of academic writing as a conversation with other scholars and/or sources. Many students took “writing is like a conversation” literally, creating compare/contrast papers rather than arguments. With that said, many students moved beyond compare/contrast or summary tendencies to join academic conversations with their own voice and their own ideas. Ultimately, the vast majority of students in both English 5B and English 10 seemed to at least understand that effective writing includes engaging in ongoing academic discussions through the use of outside sources.
- Language Use: Many portfolios indicated second language issues, which are a significant challenge in our program and university. With that said, it is important to look beyond those issues with language use to best capture the variety of students we teach. At one end of the extreme are seemingly hardworking students with significant second language issues and at the other are native speakers who either don’t understand or don’t care about effective sentence construction. In the middle of the spectrum are students who have a strong command of English and an understanding of how sentences work together in a paragraph, but who need to continue to work on sentence and paragraph construction. The students whose “lazy” language use stood out the most were English 10 students who, theoretically at least, selected English 10 based on their strong writing abilities. Though there are probably more second language speakers in English 5B, these students demonstrated more comfort with how sentences work together to develop thoughts or contentions.
- Reflection: An interesting difference between English 10 and English 5B students was in their use of reflection. While English 10 students were concentrating on their newfound awareness of their audience, the English 5B students had already accomplished that and had moved onto more complex analysis and meaning-making (not to say that awareness of audience doesn’t result in complex analysis). In addition, more English 5B students seemed to use reflection as an analytical device in their polished essays in addition to their reflective essays, in contrast to English 10 students, who tended to confine reflection to their reflective essays.
- Research: Most English 10 students demonstrate understanding of and reason to conduct research but fall a little short on how to use it to develop an argument—the answer to “so what?” Similarly, while some may not quite make it, most English 5B students use research to develop their own arguments—they do not generally stop at the compare/contrast or reporting stage.

## Analysis

While many English 10 portfolios represented the learning outcomes strongly, in general, 5B students, as a whole, produced more complex and interesting writing. Specifically, in the outcomes of Joining Academic Conversations, Reflection, Research and Writing

Rhetorically, English 5B students seem to be working at a more sophisticated level. In this regard, students are getting more out of the two-semester course. That is, perhaps just simply because of the English 5B students' two-semester exposure to academic discourse in comparison to the English 10 students' one-semester exposure; English 5B students can more skillfully or confidently incorporate the discursive "moves" to which they are exposed through their course readings and through the writing of their peers.

The "success" of students in English 5B in comparison to students in English 10 may also be a result of DSP itself: students are choosing correctly to go into 5A/5B and perhaps not making the correct choice to go into English 10. In particular, anecdotal evidence from teachers and students has demonstrated, particularly in the last year, that students have not had the information they needed to make the right choice; in addition students seem to choose classes for what we would consider the wrong reasons: English 10 finishes the requirement in less time.

### **Implementation**

This research has helped us to understand some of the inconsistencies between the two programs, ways to improve DSP, and has helped us to consider better ways to use the portfolio.

- Joining Academic Conversations and Research: We found a wide range in research expectations between the teachers whose portfolios we analyzed. Through orientations and meetings with teachers, we standardized our research expectations throughout the program, so that all teachers could prepare students to meet those standards. This doesn't address the two semester versus the one semester problem discussed above, but it does help teachers to have similar goals when teaching to these outcomes.
- Reflection: Many English 10 teachers were not working with students on their reflective cover letter for their portfolios, where most of the outcomes for reflection could be found. As English 5B students had already been through a midterm and final portfolio reading in English 5A, they had much more practice with this kind of thinking and writing. Thus, we standardized reflection across our program by getting teachers to spend some time working with students on their reflections in class, as some teachers were giving the assignment to students and letting them accomplish it on their own with minimal to no feedback about how readers might read this piece of writing.
- Language Use: As mentioned above, we have a range of language use issues that face our program. Each group of students needs something different from their teachers, so the composition faculty are using a variety of different teacher development contexts to help teachers figure out the best ways to address all of our students' needs. That said, even one, two or three semester of focused attention on language use is not enough for many native language and ESL students to be able to graduate from the university meeting the expectations that many professors and administrators have. Language learning, as with learning to write, is something that takes continual and consistent practice and reinforcement.

Finally, we have also taken information about how DSP functions and presented that information locally, to the Student Success Task Force and nationally, to The Conference on College Composition and Communication. In our local context we shared our concerns about how students were getting information, how they were being advised, and how they acquired help from other university offices to make their decisions; we requested support from these other offices to point students toward particular material and let them have the final choice. At our national conference, we called for more scholarship on DSP in order to help us create strategies for allowing for student choice while also helping them to make the best decisions for their education.

### **Works Cited**

Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, England: Longman Group LTD, 1995.

Gee, James Paul. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*. Third Edition. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Royer, Daniel J. and Roger Gilles. "Introduction: FAQ." *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. 2003.

## Appendix A: Outcome Categories with Final Outcomes

<b>Joining Academic Conversations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>think of writing as an attempt to influence audience</i></li> <li>• <i>explain the significance of their findings</i></li> <li>• <i>identify the author's assumptions, argument, major claims</i></li> <li>• <i>distinguish between good evidence and less effective evidence</i></li> </ul>
<b>Language Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>demonstrate sentence control and variety</i></li> <li>• <i>understand editing as a process of rhetorical decision-making</i></li> <li>• <i>more complex sentence structure</i></li> <li>• <i>academic language use</i></li> <li>• <i>transitioning into research (others' ideas)</i></li> <li>• <i>second language issues</i></li> </ul>
<b>Reading Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>understand how texts relate to larger issues, or other texts, or an ongoing conversation</i></li> <li>• <i>analyze texts through close reading</i></li> </ul>
<b>Reflection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>develop ideas through observations and reflections on their own experience</i></li> <li>• <i>articulate what they have learned over time</i></li> <li>• <i>articulate what they are trying to accomplish in a piece of writing</i></li> </ul>
<b>Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>draw on a variety of research methods</i></li> <li>• <i>locate, analyze and integrate research to develop an argument</i></li> <li>• <i>use secondary sources effectively</i></li> <li>• <i>understand the conventions of citation</i></li> <li>• <i>summarize, paraphrase, quote, and cite research in their writing</i></li> <li>• <i>identify the difference between evidence, claims, and explanations</i></li> </ul>
<b>Writing Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>practice prewriting as a stage of invention and idea generation</i></li> <li>• <i>perform several strategies for outlining or organizational planning</i></li> <li>• <i>use revision as a stage of rethinking content and structure</i></li> <li>• <i>develop several strategies for revision</i></li> <li>• <i>understand that different writings/ genres call for varying processes</i></li> </ul>
<b>Writing Rhetorically</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>revise writing according to purpose, audience, situation, persona, genre, message</i></li> <li>• <i>describe writing as a process of decision making</i></li> <li>• <i>problematize an issue</i></li> <li>• <i>identify and summarize the academic conversation that frames an issue</i></li> <li>• <i>understand drafting/speculative writing as a mode of discovery and invention</i></li> <li>• <i>understand how a thesis or controlling idea shapes the structure of a text</i></li> </ul>