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# Critical, Third-Space Phenomenology as a Framework for Validating College Composition Placement

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CRITICAL, THIRD-SPACE PHENEMENOLOGY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR

VALIDATING COLLEGE COMPOSITION PLACEMENT

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

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# ABSTRACT

Title: Critical Third-Space Phenomenology as a Framework for Validating College

Composition Placement

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The topic of this study is the validity of college composition placement decisions, particularly the decision to place incoming students into Basic Writing (BW), the lower level English composition course, at a western Pennsylvania university. Validity is the study of the quality of decisions made in educational assessment, and current validity theory says that in order to validate placement (or any assessment) programs, one must investigate *all possible evidence both for and against* the decisions made, searching not only for evidence of the intended consequences but also searching for unintended negative social consequences that may outweigh the benefits of placement decisions, posing threats to a program's validity. My review of college composition placement validation literature reveals that few studies make attempts to both (a) refute counter-arguments for a program's validity and (b) to weigh an investigation of social consequences into the validity argument.

The purpose of this study is to apply these two major imperatives of current validity theory to a validation study of the University of the Western Atlantic's (UWA, a

pseudonym) placement program. In order to tap into data sources that might reveal counter-arguments and issues of social consequences, I suggest that a phenomenological framework must be employed, because only through a critical inquiry into BW students' lived experience of their placement can a researcher fully make the argument for or against the validity of the placement decisions. A careful reading of validity theory literature shows that data regarding the lived experience of the students affected by the placement decision is theoretically supported. This study will attempt to answer that call by reporting findings from series of unstructured interviews with BW students over the course of their semester in the class. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be the primary analytical tool used to reveal both personal and societal issues that reside in the recorded interviews. By reporting themes that emerge from this qualitative research, this study hopes to provide information key to the ongoing validation of UWA's placement program, and to serve as a model for a type of investigation crucial to any placement program's validation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

**Introduction**

The topic of this study is the validity of college composition placement decisions, particularly the decision to place incoming students into Basic Writing (BW), the lower level English composition course, at a western Pennsylvania university. I use the term *validity* here, as it is currently conceived, to refer to the appropriateness and adequacy of the inferences made based on test scores (Messick, 1989b), where the term *test score* denotes "any observed consistency, not just on tests as ordinarily conceived but on any means of observing or documenting consistent behaviors or attributes" (p. 13). One key to this current definition of validity (covered in detail in Chapter Two) is the notion that it is the *inferences drawn* and the ensuing *decisions made*—not the raw test scores themselves—that are valid or invalid. While older definitions of validity held that a test itself could be valid (if it measured what it purported to measure), the field of educational measurement outgrew this definition decades ago (AERA, et a., 1999; Cureton, 1955; Cronbach, 1971; Messick, 1989b; Kane, 2006; Williamson, 2003). In the case of first-year composition placement in particular, validity should be understood as the extent to which the decision to place a student into a given course is the most appropriate and adequate, or profitable (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009) decision for the student; consequently, the validity of a placement decision will always be a matter of degree, never a hard fact.

In order to assess this level of appropriateness and adequacy, or profitability, of placement decisions, "[m]ultiple data sources need to be collected and then triangulated

to determine whether students are in the most appropriate course" (Hester, et al., 2007, p. 73), so that the course will more likely "promise greater benefit to the student if the plan is carried out than if alternative plans are followed" (Messick, 1989b, p. 67).  But seeing to it that this course of action is truly more beneficial than alternative plans is no simple or clear cut matter.

When considering the validity of a student's placement, there is a seemingly endless number of factors that could, and should, be considered. Without even broaching the highly contested topic of literacy—what it means, and the matters of social identity embedded within (e.g., Gee, 2000; Street, 1986)—Kane (1992) helps demonstrate how a matter as apparently concrete as math placement (which, granted, compositionists may tend to over-simplify) rests on numerous assumptions that often remain implicit. Kane describes a hypothetical calculus placement decision, and then proceeds to reveal a list of assumptions upon which the validity of such a decisions rests:

> *Assumption 1.* Certain algebraic skills are prerequisites for the calculus course in the sense that these skills are used extensively in the calculus course, and students who lack these skills are likely to have great difficulty in the calculus course.
>
> *Assumption 2.* The content domain of the placement test matches the target domain of algebraic skills used in the calculus course.
>
> *Assumption 3.* Scores on the test are generalizable across samples of items, scorers, and occasions.
>
> *Assumption 4.* There are no sources of systematic error that would bias the interpretation of the test scores as measures of skill in algebra.

*Assumption 5.* An appropriate measure of success in the calculus course is

available.

*Assumption 6.* The remedial course is effective in teaching the algebraic skills

used in the calculus course.

*Assumption 7.* Students with a high level of skill in algebra would not

substantially improve these skills in the remedial course and therefore would not

substantially improve their chances of success in the calculus course. (pp. 531-

532).

A great part of validation, for Kane, rests in the search for—and the explicit statement

of—such assumptions: "[w]ithout the discipline imposed by an explicitly stated

interpretive argument, it is easy to make claims based on implicit assumptions" (Kane,

2006, p. 26), and therefore, that such claims are not based upon a solid argument for what

is the most appropriate decision that can be made for the student.

Now, even with all of these implicit assumptions unveiled by Kane (1992) above,

he has yet to examine any of the *consequences* of placement for the student, another key

factor in determining the validity of a placement (or any assessment) decision, as Messick

(1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994) so strenuously argues, and as the present study seeks to

investigate.

**Messick and *Social Consequences***

Messick's work on validity (in particular, 1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994)

discussed the role of social consequences, arguing in particular that "evidence of intended

and unintended consequences of test interpretation and use should be evaluated as an

integral part of the validation process" (Messick, 1994, p. 22). So, in addition to the

questions Kane (1992) raised above, Messick argued that one would need to consider how the decisions being made by a placement program are playing out in the broader lives of the student—and even society at large—if one is to argue for their validity. And, this is where the present dissertation fits in.

My argument will be that, as shown in the review of literature in Chapter Two, composition placement validation studies have thus far only used limited means of evaluating the role of the consequences experienced by the students. In my study—after reviewing composition literature that discusses existing methods of placement validation—I attempt to employ a new method of evaluating the ways in which course placement itself turns out to be appropriate and/or profitable for the student. At the heart of this method is a framework that I call *critical, third-space phenomenology*.

**Framework Preview**

Critical, third-space phenomenology—which will be laid out in detail in throughout the present work—seeks to answer the call of validity theorists to incorporate meaning-oriented (e.g., Messick, 1989b), qualitative (e.g.., Moss, 1994, 1998) data into the ongoing validation of an assessment procedure, in this case college composition placement. In my literature review (Chapter Two), I discuss two specific issues that seem to be missing from most composition placement validation literature, namely, (a) a qualitative component meant to triangulate, and help reveal the meanings behind, any quantitative data, and (b) a genuine attempt to raise and refute counter hypotheses to the argument for the validity of the placements. The primary research question guiding the present study regards the type of information that might be gained from series of unstructured interviews with BW students throughout their first semesters of college—

information that might either be missed, or even misread or misrepresented, by the typical validation methods reported in most composition placement validation literature. The study I present describes just such series of interviews.

In this dissertation, I attempt to (a) add this information into the ongoing validation research about the placement program at the University of the Western Atlantic (UWA, a pseudonym), and (b) hopefully add to the larger discussion of college composition placement in general by raising issues about validation research that may be useful for those involved in such placement programs at other universities.

First, though, it must be noted that Messick's (1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994) use of the word *social* may need some clarification, for I suggest that it could equally mean *personal* consequences (as in, how a course placement affected the life of a particular placed student) and *societal* consequences (as in, how the decisions made based on a certain testing procedure might impact the social standing of certain groups, for example, if it helps serve to reinforce social inequities by tending to place white, middle class students into higher writing courses while placing proportionally more student of color in BW). A close reading of Messick's work shows that his usage of the term *social consequences* most often refers to what I will call *societal* consequences. That is, he less frequently uses the term to refer to an individual and how an assessment has consequences in his life, which would therefore affect the validity of that assessment decision; instead, Messick tends to discuss ways in which educational and psychological testing can have negative side effects on a societal level, and that "a comprehensive validation of decision-making uses of tests should include an appraisal of social consequences and side effects of the decisions" (1989b, p. 21). However, I argue that

there is no reason to not include personal consequences as well, for Messick (1989b) does discuss the matter of "consequences not only for individuals but for institutions and society" (1989b, p. 59). An evaluation of these more personal consequences—along with a critical analysis of the broader social issues involved—will be the major goal of the present study.

**A note on personal consequences.** The argument can be made that, while *societal* consequences are ongoing matters, the personal consequences resulting from placement decisions are matters we can no longer address, and consequently, they may have less to offer a validity inquiry since we cannot change the decision that was made. In fact, there is almost a paradoxical nature that emerges when one aims to evaluate the validity of a placement decision through ensuing personal consequences because one can never know for sure if a given course was the most appropriate, profitable course for a particular student. Discerning this would require weighing in the extent to which other courses (the ones she did not take) *would have* worked out for her, for her education, and for her life in general. And even if we could assess this data, we could never fold this information back into the decision that had been made before she was placed.

Yet, I contend that such impossibility does nothing to relieve the individuals in charge of a placement program of the ethical and social responsibility of reaching as far as possible toward understanding how the consequences of placement on the students interplay with the validity of those placement decision. Therefore, new methods and perspectives must be sought, ones that will take us as close as possible to that greater understanding (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1996, 1998). Again, the aim of this study is to employ a data source that has remain untapped in the literature on

placement program validation, in the hope that it can push the practice of validity inquiry closer to the theoretical ideal described above.

## Statement of the Problem

In Chapter Two, I argue that the current state of composition placement validity inquiries does not push far enough into considerations of possible consequences, or side effects (Messick, 1989b), of placement. I do so by breaking down the types of evidence most typically gathered in composition placement validity inquiries and by referring to the literature of validity theory to present the mismatch between the theory and the practice. The extent to which this gaps exists is the central problem of this dissertation, for I take the position that test validity (of any kind) is a matter of ethical and social responsibility (Cronbach, 1988; Perry, 2008; Schendel, 2000); and the degree to which decisions based upon educational assessment are not sufficiently validated is the degree to which groups and individuals may be unfairly held from, or ushered into, any number of societal goods.

## Purpose of the Study

This dissertation introduces a line of validity evidence for college composition placement decisions that has yet to be tapped, namely, the lived experience of the placed students, and the data about consequences of the placement decision that lie within such experience. While I will discuss the role of student satisfaction surveys in much of the composition placement literature in Chapter Two, I wish to note that the term *lived experience* refers to something that cannot be captured on a satisfaction survey or a structured interview, for several reasons. By lived experience, I mean a *phenomenological* perspective (Cherryholmes, 1988; Creswell, 2009; Van Manen, 1990),

a framework that seeks to be "presuppositionless" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 29), something a survey, by definition, cannot be since it must be constructed ahead of time. While I will discuss the role that student satisfaction (as most commonly captured in surveys and sometimes in structured interviews) can and do play in placement validation studies, my argument is that a *phenomenological inquiry* (Carini, 1975; Cherryholmes, 1988; Creswell, 2009; Kvale, 1999; Lincoln, 2010; Van Manen, 1990) seeks to uncover data that will likely evade (or even defy) surveys or other quantitative measures.

In terms of the broader social consequences—what I have called *societal* consequences—a phenomenological inquiry will serve as a way of collecting data about larger social forces that are the domain of a *critical* framework (defined below), one that seeks insight into socially reproductive forces such as hegemony and the interpolation of marginalized social roles. In this way, this study aims to serve as a working model of what Perry (2008) called a critical validity inquiry (CVI), which " can provide an important lens for looking at the ways in which educational evaluation like writing assessment can be used to distribute opportunities" (p. 137), because "[t]he approach of CVI is concerned with the individual and social consequences of decisions made based on test scores and inquiries into the presence of power and the misuse of power" (p. 143). While such societal consequences and side effects may be hard to see through the examination of individuals, I aim to show that a critical analysis of the themes that emerge from the interviews I present does lend itself to a broader, more social, critical line of argument (presented in Chapter Five).

**Design of the Study**

**Participant Interviews**

In order to gain access to the type of lived experience mentioned above, I conducted series of highly unstructured interviews/conversations with a small number of students (n=10) who had been placed into BW at UWA during the fall of 2009. I began the search for participants by contacting instructors teaching BW that fall via emails (see Appendix A), asking if I could have a few minutes of class-time during week 2 to tell their students about my study and to see if anyone was interested in participating. This process yielded 34 signed consent forms (see Appendix B), which led to 10 initial interviews, and eight follow-up interviews. Four of these participants continued to speak with me into the spring semester (three had left UWA after the fall, and three stopped replying to my emails, so they may or may not have stayed at UWA). In my findings (Chapters Four and Five), I report findings from eight of the initial ten participants.

My goal in these interviews was to focus on how each participant was living through the placement decision, including the ensuing BW course. I describe my methods and methodology more fully in Chapter Three, but for now I note that, in line with the phenomenological framework discussed above, my attempt was to uncover perspectives on their placement that would not be likely to surface through other approaches. Furthermore, as a way of investigating the societal elements of *social consequences* of placement, I looked for ways in which the individual might be experiencing or representing broader social forces, which are the focus of Chapter Five. In other words, I had a dual focus on both the ways that BW placement was affecting each individual's personal life, and the ways in which a participant might be presenting me with a concrete

example of the larger societal consequences  (Messick, 1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994).

**Interviewer Positionality**

In order to further encourage discussions that might present information unlikely to surface through more traditional methods of gathering validity evidence, I made consistent attempts to frame my conversations with participants outside of the institutional diad of teacher (or any *school-person*) and student. I use the theoretical concept of *third-space* (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, et al., 1995a; Soja, 1996) to describe the interviewer positionality I attempted to achieve. I made such attempts because, aside from the pre-determined nature of most traditional means of gathering student experience for validity evidence (in particular, surveys and structured interviews), another problem might simply be that when a student perceives the institution to be the one asking her the questions, she might present or highlight different experiences and perspectives than if she had been asked the same questions by a friend, parent, or another non-school person. Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) describe such traditional student-teacher interactions as "random associations between... scripts," as opposed to "true dialogue" (p. 445). My goal in this study was to get outside of the traditional institution-individual to the extent possible.

To this end, I attempted throughout our conversations to make clear that I was indeed not a part of UWA or its writing program; that, while older than my participants, I was also a UWA student. Often, for example, before an interview would start, I would ask the participant how school was going—especially paper writing—and I would share with them how classes were going for me; I would relate to difficulties with coursework or professors by sharing my own current difficulties.  Some of this was just a natural way of

getting to know the participants outside of the actual interviews, and at the same time, I

hoped that if I could relate to them on an actual student level, it might buy me a certain

third-space capital I might need when the recorder was on.  When the interviews were

taking place, if I sensed that I was getting some form of pre-packaged answers from a

participant—that is, when I felt as if I was not getting *her*, but rather, a guarded version

that was seeking to say the right things—I would try to remind the participant of my

goals of the study, and attempt to reiterate that I was indeed on *her* side and that the more

*real* our conversation could be, the more good could come from my study.

**Potential problems with third-space positionality.** To be sure, there is no way to

know the extent to which my participants felt the intended effects of this positionality, if

at all.  Since I was closer in age to their professors than their classmates, it may have only

been natural to view me as a part of the institution, no matter what I said to the contrary.

As I discuss the present study, I will describe moments when I believe the transcripts

display evidence that the participant and I are in that third-space; I do this in part so that I

can make clear that a mere assumption of third-space positionality on my part would be

counter to the very nature of this study.  Also, as I describe future applications of this

research, I will suggest different ways in which this positionality might be approached by

others who undertake similar validation research. My hope is that to the extent that I was

unable to achieve this positionality with my participant, those who employ similar

validation research methods in the future might find ways to approach this vital

methodological component.

   What I call third-space positionality, therefore, might more fully be described as

*attempts at* a third-space positionality, which would more fully acknowledge the

difficulty of entering this space, as well as the possibility that such *insider* identity may not be equally perceived by the subjects. By leaving this positionality itself open to—and in need of—argumentation, my hope is to avoid mere assumptions of how my researcher identity was perceived by my participants. Through analyzing the actual discourse of the interviews, therefore, I hope to make the case for moments when the participants and I did achieve true, off-script dialogue.

Taken together, I call this three-part methodological framework *critical, third-space phenomenology*, a term I will use throughout this dissertation, and which I will define in greater detail in Chapter Three.

### Placement at UWA

In order to better contextualize the present study, a brief description of how UWA places its first-year composition students seems relevant here, because I have spoken so far only about the quality of decisions made, not about the methods used to arrive at the decisions. Schools use somewhat varying methods of placement—from the use of test scores alone to the use of site-specific exams to some form of directed self-placement (DSP) (Royer & Gilles, 1998).

UWA uses a type of *expert reader* model (Smith, 1992, 1993) to place incoming students into College Writing (CW) and BW.  Briefly, the incoming students either write a timed essay when they come to campus for orientation, or they are allowed to submit a portfolio of writing from their high school work. If they take the placement exam (the former choice) they choose one out of two prompts supplied by the university (see Appendix D), each containing several passages from selected essays on a related theme; each prompt then asks the students to write about one or more of the passages.  The

students can access the prompts ahead of time online, and are allowed to bring an outline into the placement exam. Once the documents (the essays and portfolios) are produced or submitted, the expert readers now have the job of placing the students.

Smith's (1992) idea for the expert reader model was based on the several research studies that revealed the best judge of whether a student belongs in a given class to be a teacher who teaches (and has just recently taught) that very course in that institution. Older models held the idea that the essays/portfolios must be rated according to a pre-specified rubric and that several raters must agree upon a score, and that *score* would decide the student's placement. Smith's data suggested that the issue at hand was not agreement between raters or scores based upon compartmentalized rubrics, but rather the expert decision of a single reader who, having just taught the course in question, is in a strong position to decide that this essay/portfolio was written by a student who looks likely to either pass that course with a C or better, or who would be better served by a semester of Basic Writing.

At UWA, if a CW reader decides the student is not yet ready for CW, he or she passes the essay/portfolio to an expert reader who just taught Basic Writing, and this reader makes the decision to either place the student into Basic Writing or move them back up to Composition. If the student submitted a portfolio, he or she may be placed out of both courses, but if the placement essay was written, Composition is the highest placement allowed.

As a further way of increasing what Smith (1993) called the *adequacy* of placement, BW instructors are asked to read an essay written by each student during the first week of classes in order to see if certain students seem to have been misplaced or

would be better off in CW. At this point, if the student was placed into BW and if his teacher's reading of his first-week says suggests to the instructor that BW is the best course for him, he stays in the class. But UWA adds one more way for stronger students to avoid taking two composition courses as a result of BW placement. If a student receives an A in the course, she can submit a portfolio of coursework and ask to be exempt from CW, which would mean that in the end, she still only took one semester of first-year composition.

While the purpose of this study is in part to validate UWA's placement program, to help in the ongoing process of making the program better, another concern is more broadly to demonstrate *what it takes* to perform a validation inquiry, given the climate of the field of current validity theory. Again, these two goals will roughly demarcate Chapters 4 and 5. The overall point of this dissertation is to put the theory of validity to work, to show that even with the best possible placement program in place, certain data only obtainable through a study such as this are needed to add into the accumulating sources of evidence that could serve to support or negate (or suggest ways to improve) the current procedures. No definitive answers are sought here; rather, I seek new and untapped, yet vital, sources of information and insight.

### Research Questions

As with any validity inquiry, the major question is whether the decisions being made by the placement program are appropriate. In addition, and what makes my inquiry assume a slightly different stance than most validation studies, I asked:

- What validity evidence can be amassed from unstructured, phenomenological, third-space interviews? Will themes and perspectives emerge that would be both

(a) relevant to the validity of the decisions (and the program making them) and (b) likely to evade the more traditional lines of validity evidence, such as grades, retention rates, and even satisfaction surveys (see Chapter Two)?

- ◦ Among the major questions sought thought this type of inquiry, I ask: How does a BW placement affect a student's identity (as a writer, as a student) play into the validity of that decision? In other words, What role might a BW placement play in a student's perception of herself as a writer, her view of her writing abilities, and can this effect cause more harm than the good the course hopes to provide?

- Can a BW placement decision itself, if it causes negatively experienced personal consequences, cause more damage to the individual's sense of herself as a writer and learner than the BW course itself is able to overcome, and if so, does this decision have validity?

- ◦ And, are there ways to assess the *success* of BW that only arise through this type of experience-based inquiry, rather than simply looking at student grades?

**Broader, *Critical* Social Questions**

As I mentioned above, this study seeks not only to use the personal consequences of placement as validity evidence, but also to inquire into more critical social matters. By *critical*, as discussed below, I mean a notion that, for example, "social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society, in contrast to traditional theory oriented solely toward understanding or explaining it" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 6), which therefore entails "an analysis of power relations. In other words, critical theorists ask,

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'What constitutes power?' Who holds it?' and 'In what ways is it utilized to benefit those already in power?'" (Lynn, et al., 2006, p. 18).

Toward this end, I ask:

- How can a placement testing program use phenomenological evidence to assess whether or not placement decisions are accidentally serving to reinforce marginalized or stigmatized social roles of students from traditionally marginalized groups?

In this way, I justify my focus on BW, rather than CW placement validation, because as Messick (1989b) said, "concern with minimizing underpredictions, or the proportion of rejected individuals who would succeed if given the opportunity, is also an important social value in connection both with individual equity and with parity for minority and disadvantaged groups" (pp. 79-80), and the critical nature of the present investigation is meant to focus on matters of both social and individual inequity and disadvantage.

**Significance of the Study**

The primary significance of this study relates to the consideration of validity as a matter of ethical and social responsibility (AERA et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1971, 1988; Messick, 1989a, 1989b; Moss, 1996, 1998; Schendel, 2000), as can be seen from the passage just cited from Messick (1989b). The purpose for validation research about a placement program, again, is to find out how well it is placing students into the most appropriate, profitable courses; that all of the possible risks of BW are outweighed by the benefits of the course; that BW course placement is doing more good than harm to the individual students, the school, and to wider society. In this way, all validation research— including the present study, has great significance.

This study also found broader, social significance due to the power that those who implement educational and psychological tests possess in terms of helping to delegate "who gets what in society" (Cronbach, 1988, p. 5). One purpose of validation research is to ensure that this power is used ethically and equitably, and that it does not serve to reproduce negative social forces.  In this way, my study can be seen as a working model of Perry's (2008) CVI, which "seeks to understand how power is exerted by the test design, test conditions, and decisions made based on the test scores, and how this power affects the particular groups and individuals assessed" (p. 152).  If Cronbach is right that educational and psychological tests help determine power relations in society, then this study gains significance by serving as a model of evaluating the quality and consequences of those tests by presenting a new method and framework of inquiry.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter Two reviews the literature of composition placement validation in order to explore the most commonly reported methods of gathering and evaluating validity evidence.  At the same time, I will cover literature from validity theory in order to evaluate the extent to which the placement validity literature I review lives up to the theoretical and ethical demands of current theory. By the end of Chapter Two, I show the reader that this study is indeed missing from the literature of composition placement validation, and also that it is theoretically supported by the field of educational measurement.

Chapter Three covers the specific methods, methodology, and theoretical framework of the study.  There I attempt to show the reader that a theoretical framework that is both critical and phenomenological is needed to mine the type of data that I argue

is needed for a thorough validity inquiry.  Further, Chapter Three discusses in more detail the notion of third-space positionality (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, et al., 1995a; Soja, 1996), and why researcher identity is crucial to the framework of the study.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the study itself: Chapter Four discusses the more personal issues that arose from my conversations with participants, such as how the placement decision and ensuing BW course seemed to be working out in their lives, and the impact of the BW placement and course on their ever-developing sense of identity as student and writer.  In this way, Chapter Four focuses specifically on these participants, and therefore, particularly on UWA's placement program and methods.  Chapter Five is where I attempt to address broader social concerns, ones that I hope will be useful to any individuals involved in the placement of first-year writing students.

Finally, Chapter Six draws conclusions and presents a specific plan for a placement model that would help take the better elements from different placement models as well as insight from the study in this dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Regardless of how placement decisions are made, it is incumbent upon individuals using any form of assessment (even student self-assessment) to offer some evidence that the educational decisions being made by or for students are profitable to the students involved (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009, p. 89).

The central concern of this dissertation, and the study at its heart, is precisely what O'Neill, Moore, and Huot (2009) mention above, namely, that research is needed to gather evidence that a placement program is working well (that it is making the best possible decisions it can be making for the students involved). Without performing this type of research—a *validity inquiry* or *validation research*—the individuals in charge of the placement would be falling short of their ethical responsibility to ensure that their placement decisions are doing more good than harm for both their students individually, for the institution, and even for society on a broader level (AERA, et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1988; Huot, 2002; Huot & Neal, 2006; Huot & Williamson, 1997; Kane, 1992; 2006; Messick, 1989a, 1989b; Moore, O'Neill, & Huot, 2009; Moss, 1992, 1994, 1996; Schendel, 2000; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999; Williamson, 2003), because as scholars have argued for decades, test (broadly defined) that serve to reinforce or help reproduce social inequities cannot be considered valid.

Not all theorists have viewed the interplay of test validity and social impact the same way, however, as Moss (1992) pointed out, "For Messick, it seems that adverse social consequences are a source of invalidity only if they are a result of construct invalidity, whereas for Cronbach, adverse social consequences, in and of themselves, call

the validity of a test use into question" (p. 236). But the fact remains that considerations of a test's (or testing program's) impact on society have been essential to notions of test validity for decades: Far from its roots as a measure only of the accuracy of the test, test validity is now often seen from a critical perspective, that is, as a matter of social justice. Cronbach (1988) said, "psychological and educational tests influence who gets what in society" (p. 5), a fact that helps put into perspective the social responsibility of those who use and validate such tests. Making sure the decisions based on those tests are socially responsible is much more than a mere technical matter of accuracy (an issue that will come up several times below).

The notion of social responsibility of validation research is advanced by Perry's (2008) concept of Critical Validity Inquiry (CVI), which he defines as,

> a process that seeks to understand the misuse of power through educational
> assessment practices. By merging rhetorical and critical theory within the
> argument one can make for the use of educational measurement, CVI can provide
> an important lens for looking at the ways in which educational evaluation like
> writing assessment can be used to distribute opportunities, withhold access or
> other use or abuse of the power inherent in educational decision-making. (p. 137).

What this dissertations provides is an empirical study of the role of lived experience in validation, with the intention of uncovering data that will speak to both these larger social issues, as well as to personal, experiential issues that may serve as vital evidence (or counter-evidence) for the validity of the participants' BW placement.

**Chapter Two Overview**

In the literature reviewed below, I attempt to show the extent to which composition placement validity inquiries have fallen short of current validity theory because they often pay little attention to the social consequences, on both personal and societal levels, discussed above. By demonstrating what the literature has not yet addressed, I hope to make the case that the framework I present as the foundation of my study will help as a platform to enable the current concerns of validity theory to enter into the practice of composition placement validation. In the first section, I present writing placement literature that seeks to argue for validity based on numerical, correlational data, either by attempting to validate a placement test (usually an essay exam) itself by comparing its results and predictive abilities with other procedures, or attempting to validate a placement program primarily by using evidence of grades and retention rates to show that the students have been well placed. Throughout the first section, I refer to the literature of validity theory as well, in order to show, where relevant, the ways in which these attempts are or are not living up to the theoretical and ethical demands of current theory (e.g., AERA, et al., 1999; Kane, 2006; Messick, 1989b). I then move to studies and theoretical pieces that more closely approach the current standards of validity theory, particularly the concerns for the societal and personal consequences for individuals and institutions. Thus, in the second section, I focus on literature that discusses a particular line of crucial validity evidence, namely, the deeper underlying *meaning* behind the purely quantitative research—the matters of interpretation that the numbers alone do not speak to (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 2006; Moss, 1994, 1996; Shepard, 1993). I will also continue to bring in relevant concepts from current validity theory to show possible

insufficiencies in these articles and book chapters as well, including their particular

tendency to miss possible rival theories that other scholars (Perry, 2008; Schendel &

O'Neill, 1999) have been able to assert.

The third section begins with a description of the three-part framework I have

designed for the study of the present dissertation (which includes critical,

phenomenological and third-space components, see Chapter Three), and then I turn back

to the placement literature in an attempt to show how this framework could help put into

practice the best current placement theory to date, and how it might further investigate

lines of evidence that even the best current studies have yet to fully tap into.

## Validity by Numbers

Using test scores that 'work' without some understanding of what they mean is

like using a drug that works without knowing its properties and reactions. You

might get some immediate relief, to be sure, but you better ascertain and monitor

the side effects. (Messick, 1989b, p. 63).

This section focuses on common sources of validity evidence used in college

composition placement validation literature; I will argue that these sources serve only as

*criterion-related validity evidence* (defined below), thereby falling short of the currents

standard of validation (AERA, et al., 1999), which demands more than just numerical

evidence for a claim of validity. Of particular interest are studies that employ grades and

retention rates as evidence that a placement program is valid, because, while it would

seem that checking the placement decisions made against data like this might be enough

for a convincing argument for the validity of a program, a brief consultation of validity

theory itself shows that, as good as this information is, it is not enough evidence to

support claims about the value of the test with respect to potential consequences on individuals and social institutions.

There are two primary reasons, relevant here, for the insufficiency of quantitative research as the sole methodology of a validity inquiry. First, quantitative data alone, as Shepard (1993) said, "do not explain why a relationship exists" (p. 433). As Messick (1989b) said, "There is simply no good way to judge the appropriateness, relevance, and usefulness of predictive inferences in the absence of evidence as to what the predictor and criterion scores mean" (p. 64). A validity inquiry, therefore, must investigate the story behind the numbers and not rest its conclusions on the raw data of the numbers alone. As Kane (2006) put it, "Mathematical models can carry us part of the way and provide a comfortable aura of objectivity and certainty, but many of the core issues in the interpretations and uses of test results take us beyond the safe harbor of strictly deductive inference" (p. 27).

**Criterion Validity Defined**

These passages serve as examples of why the concept of *criterion validity* is no longer considered theoretically viable (AERA et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1988; Embretson, 2007; Kane, 2008; Gorin, 2007; Messick, 1989b; Mislevy, 2007; Moss, 2007; Sireci, 2007), in part because the term implies that the matching of criteria alone can support an argument for validity (e.g., Moss 2007). Criterion validity (now more accurately called criterion-*related* validity *evidence*) has two forms: *concurrent* and *predictive* validity evidence. Concurrent validity evidence refers to the ability of one measure to line up well with other measures; for example, below I will describe studies that attempt to validate a certain placement procedure by comparing its scores to other tests the students have taken

(SAT for example). Predictive validity evidence refers to the ability of a measure to predict the future success of the student in the class in question—generally determined by the grade earned. As Huot, O'Neill, and Moore (2010) described it:

> [C]riterion validity made sure that performance on an examination was related to other performances or valued measures. For example, a score on a writing test could be seen as having concurrent validity with a student's scores on the SAT Verbal or predictive validity for students' grades in first-year writing classes. (p. 505).

The above passages from Kane (2006), Shepard (1993), and Messick (1989b) show, in part, why such evidence alone is not enough for a validity inquiry: such numerical data alone says little about the meaning or the *quality* (i.e., validity) of the decisions.

The second reason why numerical data (or any criterion-related evidence) are not sufficient evidence for validity is deeply related to the first reason: an argument for validity must include *refutations of plausible rival hypotheses* in order to help ensure that these other, rival explanations are actually more plausible than the argument the program wishes to make (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Shepard, 1993); that is, those wishing to validate a program must go looking for weaknesses in their own argument in order to show that the interpretation presented in indeed the strongest one. Current validity theory is, as Cronbach (1988) said, "best guided by the phrase 'plausible rival hypotheses,'" for, "Popper taught us that an explanation gains credibility chiefly from falsification attempts that fail." (p. 13). The notion of rival plausible hypotheses, counterhypotheses, whatever we term them, is a major theme in the work of Kane (1992, 2001, 2006, 2008) and also something that Shepard (1993) and Moss (1996) strongly

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advocate. Correlations with other measures (or with future performance) themselves can help researchers make validity arguments, for sure, but it is the researchers themselves who must devise and refute plausible counterhypotheses in order to go from a weak to a strong argument (Cronbach, 1988). As Mislevy (2007) said, "Validity accrues as the warrant better fits the circumstances at hand, as its backing is stronger and comes from different sources, and as more alternative explanations can be countered more convincingly" (p. 464).

These two concerns together—(a) that validity is heavily centered around the *meaning* behind numerical data, and (b) that any argument for validation is only as strong as the counterarguments against it that fail—can help show why most of the composition placement validation literature up to this point has not met the demands of current validity theory. Once this problem is established, I hope to argue that the study and framework that I present here can provide an opportunity to take validity *practice* one step closer to current validity theory.

**Studies Based on Comparisons with Other Tests**

As a recent example of validation by correlation, here is how Isaacs and Molloy (2010) evaluated the validity of the SAT-W score as a means of composition placement:

Two percent of students would have been admitted to College Writing despite very low essay scores of 5, 4, or 3. Further, 43 percent of GSU [General State University] students with a total SAT-W score of 400 or lower would have to be placed into Intro Writing even though their actual essay score was 7 or higher. Fifteen percent would place into Intro Writing even though their essay grades were 8 or higher. What we see in these numbers is the deceptive nature of the SAT

writing assessment; we think of this as an impromptu, timed writing essay test,

when in fact it is only partially that—mostly it is a multiple-choice test that asks

students what they know about writing. (p. 523).

While the conclusion reached do favor the use of assessing writing—not just the SAT's

version of it—in order to place students, the evidence to support this conclusion only uses

a comparison to where the same students would have been placed by other means, not

any sense of whether either place was good or bad, adequate or appropriate (i.e., valid).

This evaluation of the SAT as a placement exam rests solely on where the students were

placed, not the quality of any of the placements themselves, an issue that will come up

again shortly.

Peckham (2006) made a similar argument by comparing placements based on

standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, and AP to placements from holistic scoring.

And Reinheimer (2007) stated, "it was determined that a correlation comparing the

original placement decision with an expert-rater assessment of the same placement

artifact would provide the most effective evidence for the validity argument" (p. 173).

Again the authors here are making evaluations based solely on what the placement

decisions were, not the *quality* of the decisions or the *consequences* that are truly the

heart of validity theory (AERA, et al., 1999; Crooks & Kane, 1996; Cronbach, 1988;

Hester, et al., 2007; Huot, 2002; Kane, 2006; Messick, 1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b; 1994;

Moss, 1992, 1994; 1996, 1998; Nichols & Williams, 2009; O'Neill, Moore, & Huot,

2009; Schendel, 2000; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999; Shepard, 1993; Williamson, 2003).

Even though he used multiple methods of inquiry, Haswell (1998) was also

validating the placement procedure at Washington State University with no discussion of

the quality of the placement. Haswell argued, "it is unreasonable and unprofitable to validate a formal writing test along one measure, or even along a few measures, and second that it is easy and profitable to validate a writing test, even a large-scale formal one, along many" (p. 90); however, all of his measures seem to stay within the realm of numerical, criterion-related evidence. For example, Haswell recirculated 27 essays that had led to placement in regular composition, and he reports that all but one were placed in this course again; further, he looked into course performance for another 100 students and found that 95 received credit, four were "unable to pass" (p. 101), and one failed to submit all the work. But as Messick (1989b), for example, argued, the fact that such numbers indicate either concurrent or predictive validity evidence is not enough to evaluate the quality (validity) of the decisions; further, such reliance upon criteria alone reflects an old model of validity, before concerns for meaning, refutation of rival hypotheses, and social consequences became critically important.

The use of such information alone—that different placement procedures would have reached similar conclusions—is not only insufficient validity evidence, it can actually be quite dangerous when one considers the social impact of educational testing (AERA, et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998).

As Messick (1989b) warned,

It is not enough, for example, to show that a test significantly improves the prediction of   freshman grades at a particular college. Whether it should be used in selection . . . depends on what the scores *mean*.  It is one thing if the scores

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reflect achievement striving, for instance, but what if they reflect docility?" (p. 64,

emphasis added).

I think it is no accident that Messick uses the term *docility* here; for of all the negative

qualities that a testing program can unintentionally help foster, docility would seem to be

among the most dangerous—at least from a critical standpoint. In other words, if people

are rewarded (with high test scores, leading to social goods and social standing) for their

docility, and if those who refuse to be docile therefore fall into or remain in marginalized

social roles, the societal impact would clearly be one in which a test has helped to

preserve an inequitable status quo. So, considering the viewpoint of seminal validity

theorists such as Cronbach (1988) and Messick (1989b), the tendency to validate a testing

program (in this case a placement program) via numerical data alone may be much worse

than merely theoretically insufficient. At the very least, however, it is insufficient.

**Studies Based on Grades and Retention Rates**

In James' (2006) "Validating a Computerized Scoring System for Assessing

Writing and Placing Students in Composition Courses," the author's approach to validity

entailed comparing the scores of the human raters with the *IntelliMetric* computer

program, but she took the study further by  also comparing the *predictive* ability of the

two. In other words, she looked not only at how different test types correlate in their

measurement *at the time of placement*; she also examined how well each one did in

predicting the *future success* of the placed student in their composition courses, which

shows a concern for the consequences of placement not seen in the previous section.

Hansen et al. (2004) report on a similar study in which holistic scoring of impromptu

essays was compared to AP test scores and AP high school class grades; both studies used

correlations with later performance/success in college composition. In fact, Hansen et al. call for more research to be done on predictions as a source of validity, "focusing on the predictive validity of AP English scores for student success in college" (p.81). These serve as some examples of studies that involve the use of some level of *consequences*, not just numbers alone.

Jones (2008) asked the crucial question about placement validity as it relates to future success in composition courses: "How should success be measured?" (p. 61). His answers are primarily GPAs and pass rates in the courses, but he also mentions surveys for students about their perceptions of their success in the course, and surveys for teachers about their views of students' attitudes. Again, these seem to be lines of evidence that utilize consequences, not just correlations. However, it is important to note that the way these studies treat success in the course, it is still just a comparison or correlation. In other words, the authors are still only seeking strictly numerical evidence, but no rival hypotheses, no investigation into the meaning behind the numbers, thereby leaving the door open to possible personal and societal consequences that Messick (1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994) warns so strongly against.

Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen (2008) serves as another example of a validity inquiry that, on close examination, reveals nothing other than correlations. They present the following research questions in regard to computer-generated (Accuplacer) placement scores versus holistically graded essays' diagnostic scores:

> *Research Question 1: Do low placement scores correlate with lack of success?*
> *Research Question 2: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with lack of success?*

*Research Question 3: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with low placement scores?*

*Research Question 4: Do diagnostic scores, Accuplacer scores, or a combination of both scores predict students' success?*

They then say,

> By answering these research questions, we have also tested the validity of Accuplacer scores and holistically graded diagnostic essays. The results show that either of these measures is a reliable predictor of success and that the two measures together make for an even more reliable predictor. (p. 88).

But the fact is that they have only tested the reliability of these two procedure; they have not tested the validity of Accuplacer, for they have only used correlations. Both Accuplacer and holistically graded essays may yield similar placement decisions, but as of yet, the authors have not addressed the crucial matter of whether or not these decisions are equally *good* or *bad* (valid or invalid). They use the term *success* but they do not define it; consequently, the reader is left to assume that success is equal to grades, but I argue that this (criterion-related) measure alone does not speak in a satisfying way to the quality and consequences of these placement decisions, and therefore, to the validity of the placement procedures. (Chapters Four and Five re-address this argument.)

Reinheimer (2007) sounds as if he is in the right arena as he begins his article with the following statement:

> What the review [of the placement program] wished to see was if the meaning of the scores was valid; that is, whether or not the placement decision based on a student's test score put the student into the correct class. As the placement

measure is a holistically-scored, impromptu writing sample, a course-grade

correlation was deemed inappropriate. . . (p. 173).

Other than a possible problem with the word *correct,* which may imply more of a matter

of fact than of appropriateness of decision, Reinheimer's (2007) piece is the first I one

reviewed that incorporates the meaning of the placement decisions into the validity of the

program.  But he then proceeds, ". . . rather, it was determined that a correlation

comparing the original placement decision with an expert-rater assessment of the same

placement artifact would provide the most effective evidence for the validity argument"

(p. 173), a statement that reverts to the same problems shown above, namely, the lack of

inquiry into the appropriateness and profitability of the course; the lack of inquiry into

whether another course of action would have been a better alternative (Messick, 1989b).

Ziegler (2006) discussed whether or not computerized scoring programs *work* for

placing students, but he too relies solely on comparing the computerized placements with

other placements using faculty judgment. He also compared E-Write scores to "success in

college composition" (p. 144), but only as defined by predictions of course grades.

Gleason (2000) seems to agree with definition of success, saying,

Clifford Adelman points out, transcripts "tell us what really happens, what courses

students really take, the credits and grades they really earn, the degrees they really

finish and when those degrees are awarded" (vii).

In my study, I will attempt to show that there is more to "what really happens" than the

can be seen in a student transcript; and that, in fact, what a transcript says can sometimes

belie what really happens (see Chapter Four).

Crusan (2002), in discussing ESL placement said, "I submit results of preliminary

research which questions modes of writing assessment and their relationship to final grades in composition classes," again assuming, along with Reynolds (2003), and Dryer (2008), that evidence of validity through correlations of course grades and retention rates is sufficient. And Bedore and Rossen-Knill (2004) serves as another example of a report that evaluates students' writing, not quality of the placement decisions, as the major line of validity evidence for their program of *informed self-placement*.

Reynolds (2003) did say, "Further longitudinal studies are necessary" to validate DSP programs, but only "to determine the retention rates, attrition rates, and grades in contiguous writing courses of students who have been directed in self-placement" (p. 102). And Cornell and Newton (2003) assessed the quality of DSP decisions by asking, "Is there evidence that students' rate of graduation from or persistence at the university is compromised by their choices?" (p. 150).

**Criterion validity and its limitations.** As mentioned above, validity theorists have long-since discarded the concept of criterion validity, referring instead to *criterion-related validity-evidence*, a term that implies the proper role of numerical evidence as only a *part of* validation, even if a highly important part, but not complete in and of itself. Yet I argue that everything reviewed thus far has been employing the old model of criterion validity, not validity proper (often called *construct validity* in the literature), which is a real problem—something that the present study is meant to help by presenting a working model of a validity inquiry that seeks evidence beyond the matching of criteria. Again, criterion-related evidence of validity is a good, even necessary line of evidence; but it is not alone sufficient. In fact, Messick's (1989b) spends 26 pages (pp. 63-89) explaining why criterion-related validity evidence (by then no longer considered a

*type* of validity) alone is not enough for a claim of validity (among these pages is the passage that mentions docility, cited above).

Even when criterion validity still had weight as a concept on its own, Cronbach's (1971) said that it was only "[i]n the narrow view, [that] validation consists of checking the test score against some other observation that serves as *criterion*," reminding us that "[t]he theory of prediction was very nearly the whole of validity theory until about 1950; in the last two decades, testers have given increasing attention to descriptive and explanatory interpretations and have relegated prediction theory to a secondary position" (p. 443).

Shepard (1993) presented this brief historical overview:

From 1920 to 1950, test-criterion correlations became the standard for judging test accuracy. The classical verbal definition of validity, "Does a test measure what it purports to measure?" was answered by a single correlation. In the 1940s, this identity was so strong that the term *validity* came to be used synonymously to mean a predictive correlation coefficient (a practice that, unfortunately, continues). (pp. 410-411).

I take this brief detour so that I can more explicitly point out that instances of the outdated model of criterion validity (whether predictive or concurrent) pervade the literature on composition placement validation to a problematic extent, because the use of such a model implies that the argument for validation can stop there. As Cronbach (1988) said, "The 30-year-old idea of three types of validity, separate but maybe equal, is an idea whose time has gone. . . content and criterion validities are *no more than strands within* a cable of validity argument (Dunnette & Borman, 1979; Guion, 1980; Messick, 1980)" (p.

4, my emphasis). That cable of a validity argument—a unified concept of validity in which all lines of evidence serve the one goal of validation, rather than existing as salutary ends in themselves—is the current conception of validity, one that the present dissertation and study employ.

**Section Summary**

To be sure, assessing the meaning of a test score (that is, any data obtained about an assessment procedure, e.g., Cronbach, 1971; Messick, 1989b) is a difficult and dynamic process, whereas simply stating the fact that the measurement exists is comparatively easy and definitive. As Kane (2006) put it above, "many of the core issues in the interpretations and uses of test results take us beyond the safe harbor of strictly deductive inference" (p. 27). The meaning behind numerical data, however, is now a key factor in validity theory (AERA, et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 2006; Messick, 1989a, 1989b; Moss, 1998; Shepard, 1993), because as discussed above, using scores alone as criteria for placement is dangerous; we may be using measures that reflect negative underlying traits (such as docility), and be encouraged to continue doing so because the correlations make it look as if the assessment decisions are working (are valid). So it becomes an ethical, social duty (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989a, 1989b; Schendel, 2000) to examine what the scores mean and use that *meaning* as a basis for a validity argument.

My argument in this dissertation is that a phenomenological approach—sitting down with students and discussing their lived experiences of the course, the placement, the larger lived-context that may not be discernible from a transcript—would give a validity inquiry access to all kinds of potential meanings and rival explanations of the

placement decision, both of which are needed for a critical analysis of the validity evidence.

### Literature that Approaches the Meaning of the Placement Decisions

Good theory testing requires more than gathering supporting evidence. It requires exposing desired interpretations to counter-explanations and designing studies in such a way that competing interpretations can be evaluated fairly. (Shepard 1993, p. 420).

No amount of 'common sense' or administrative concern can counterbalance the need for a placement system that has a high degree of validity and thus is defensible (Neal & Huot, 2003, p. 248).

I now turn to placement literature that does seek to incorporate meaning, rather than simply matching criteria, into the evaluation of a placement program. This section will start with several pieces written about programs that use directed self-placement (DSP), a type of procedure in which the in-coming student is provided with some level of information about the different composition courses, and is then asked to make her own decision about which course would most benefit her. All of the following papers on DSP strive to incorporate what I call *meaning-oriented claims*, the type that are a fundamental part of validity theory, but have been missing from the literature presented so far.

Royer and Gilles (1998), although their article is not in itself a study of DSP's validity, offer reasons as to why DSP *works* that I suggest actually would make a solid validity argument—if the claims were substantiated by empirical research. The authors title sections of their paper with claims like, "Directed Self-Placement Feels Right" (p. 61), "Directed Self-Placement Works"(p. 63), and "Directed Self-Placement Pleases

Everyone Involved" (p. 65), claims that surely display concern for information beyond

mere matching of correlations. If Royer and Gilles actually sought to substantiate these

claims—whether everyone was indeed pleased, for instance, or if they could show us

through data that this feeling of rightness really existed on the campus, in the classrooms

and beyond—then they would be perhaps closer to meeting the demands of a *sufficient*

validity inquiry than nearly any other study I have reviewed.

In terms of current conceptions of validation discussed above, it seems that Royer

and Gilles (1998) fail to do two things: they neither back up these claims with empirical

evidence (such as what I suggest a phenomenological inquiry could produce, since their

claims are essentially phenomenological), nor do they make attempts to raise and refute

rival hypotheses. With the incorporation of these argumentative principles, Royer and

Gilles could have a much more convincing case for the validity of their DSP program

than they might even realize (as is clear from their statement below).

Perhaps the reason they allow such claims to go unsubstantiated stems from this

somewhat ironic statement: "Our old concerns about validity and reliability are now

replaced with something akin to 'rightness.' And the rightness of the choice now lies with

the student, where we feel it belongs" (Royer & Gilles, 1998, p. 62). I call this ironic

because the term *rightness* is actually much more of what a validity inquiry *ought* to be

investigating than Royer and Gilles seem to believe. They seem to conceive of validity in

the decades-old notion of mathematical models and coefficients, and they are clearly not

alone in this belief, as shown above. But, the fact is that investigating what Royer and

Gilles call the *rightness* of a placement program is indeed a crucial component of a

validity inquiry (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1994, 1998). So while this

statement—that they are not performing a validity inquiry—may on the surface appear to take them off the hook for a fuller investigation of their claims, and for being on guard against all the social consequences that come with thorough validation, I argue that in truth they are indeed performing a validity inquiry, and so they are very much still obligated to support their claims and to examine these underlying social forces, and not relegate them to guesswork. The study at the heart of this dissertation intends to provide a methodology through which empirical evidence can be gathered and used to support claims such as these.

Other DSP works seem to present similar problems. Nicolay (2002) claimed, "Not only do [BW] students not feel 'held back' in an extra course, but the fourth credit does not necessarily signify remediation since a variety of students take it voluntarily" (p. 55). Again, I suggest that such students feelings would be a powerful line of validity evidence if substantiated. But without considering rival explanations (What if they *do* feel held back, and it *does* signify remediation?) and without explaining how she knows the students feel (or do not feel) this way, claims like these are again relegated to guesswork.

Blakesley (2002), while he did not present an empirical study, also discussed many of the issues that I claim are crucial to a validity inquiry that meets the current standards of validity theory. For example, he said,

> In the end, I believe, a writing program that successfully implements directed self-placement will find its effects showing up in instructor training, instructor-student relations, instructor and student attitudes, and, of course, student performance. The consequences of our placement methods run far deeper than we might initially presume. (p. 12).

But, just as with Royer and Gilles (1998), Blakesley leaves these claims unsubstantiated, providing no investigation of evidence to support them. But Blakesley (2002) does make some statements that could serve as highly plausible *rival* hypotheses to his arguments for DSP:

> As Sharon Crowley argues in *Composition in the University,* we may have also underestimated the degree to which first-year composition itself functions culturally, and thus hegemonically, to preserve the status quo with regard to both institutional practice and politics, as well as attitudes toward literate practice (see especially "A Personal Essay on Freshman English" 228-49). (p. 10).

Having made this statement, if Blakesley were to now refute this line of argument, he would have met a theoretical mandate of validation (and of argumentation) (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Shepard, 1993; Toulmin, 1958) that no studies reviewed so far have attempted. However, this argumentative principle only works if the original argument is able to refute the counterargument.  As presented here, what Blakesley suggests seems to supply evidence that would support some critics of DSP (e.g., Perry, 2008; Schendel & O'Neill, 2000) more than its advocates.

Cornell and Newton (2003) similarly leave one wondering why they do not actually ask some students about the experience of their placement, rather than simply speculating as to what the students must feel or be living through. (Granted, while Cornell and Newton do not explicitly call their report a validity inquiry, they are indeed presenting evidence to support their claim that their program works, which means it is indeed a validity inquiry even if not by name.) For example, they say, "We hypothesize that the self-placement choices reflect additional factors, such as 'self-efficacy', . . .

writing apprehension, or some other as yet undetermined factor" (p. 165), which shows

their good instincts in terms of what possible evidence to look for in terms of validity

threats; but by leaving it hypothetical, they fall short of a real validity argument.

Cornell and Newton (2003) hint at similar issues to Blakesley's (2002) in terms of

possible negative social reproduction that DSP may promote:

> The students who identify themselves as basic writers fall below the academic
>
> mark set by those that mainstream themselves most likely for dispositional and
>
> cultural reasons—traits of motivation, self-esteem, acculturation, and maturity.
>
> Those dispositions may become intensified or complicated by the choice—or the
>
> imposition—of a basic writing identity. (pp. 171-172).

Yet the only evidence they present is "a questionnaire on their attitudes toward the

courses they had placed themselves in and on the elective nature of College Writing I" (p.

174). I argue, though, that once they bring up this possible counterargument—that a

student's "basic writing identity" may be "intensified or complicated" by BW placement

(even if chosen)—it becomes the authors'/validators' burden to make a convincing

refutation; otherwise the argument *against* validity may be stronger than the argument for

it.

Harrington (2005) raises some issues of communication that seem to have evaded

most of the articles reviewed thus far: "Part of the validity of a placement examination, I

argue, lies in what it communicates to students and teachers about writing" (p. 26). The

question remains, though, how does she plan to investigate such matters? Harrington

answers, "We have planned an extensive validation study so that we can use students'

experiences and course performance to help subsequent students make the best decisions

possible" (p. 15). However, as she goes on to describe the plans in more detail, she too seems equate validity evidence with numerical correlations:

> While an extensive discussion of validation is the subject for another article, suffice it to say that the validation study will examine the *correlations among* course performance, previous academic performance, and self-assessment in terms of skills and attitudes about writing. (p. 15, emphasis added).

While such correlations will likely provide highly valuable validity evidence, it seems clear that the self-assessments Harrington describes will have to be represented numerically to be used for this study. There is nothing inherently wrong with such representations, but the primary purpose of this dissertation is to examine what such attitudes might say about placement validity when they are given a voice beyond a numerical coding.

**Section Summary**

The current literature on validity theory supports the notion that neither of the above mentioned lines of evidence works without the other: raw numerical data is insufficient for a validity argument (AREA, et al., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998; Smith, 1992, Shepard, 1993); and more meaning-oriented data that does not seek to substantiate its claims by both supporting them with detailed research and refuting rival plausible hypotheses is equally incomplete evidence for validity (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Messick, 1989b; Mislevy, 2007; Moss, 1996, 1998; Perry, 2008; Shepard, 1993).

The major problem I pointed out with the literature reviewed in the previous section was that it all seemed content with offering insufficient validity arguments, either

by *only* addressing what I have been calling meaning-oriented data—but doing so with no empirical support—or by polarizing their claims into *validity evidence* which was all numerical or correlational, and what Royer and Gilles (1998) called *rightness*, which was all presented as unsubstantiated guesswork and common-sense assumptions. But I argue that these latter concerns (e.g., *rightness*) are indeed researchable, supportable, capable of rigorous, empirical investigation (Creswell, 2009; Van Manen, 1990), and therefore should not be left to the domain of common sense or guesswork, assumption or wishful projection.  By taking both a critical and phenomenological perspective—and by attempting a non-institutional (third-space) positionality, as explained below—I hope to be in a better position to address the meaning behind the criteria that the studies reviewed in the first section solely relied upon; but I hope to be in a better position to substantiate claims of *rightness* shown in the second section, and to also raise more possible counterhypotheses to validity arguments for placement decisions, which can only serve to make the program as a whole stronger (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992; Messick, 1989b; Shepard, 1993).  By doing so, I believe my inquiry can live up to the theoretical demands that validation be a matter of ethics and social responsibility.

### What a Validity Inquiry Needs, and the Literature that Comes Closest

If we take the demands of construct validation seriously and resolve to use the evaluation argument approach, what would applied validation studies look like? (Shepard, 1993, p. 432).

In the present section, I present a fuller description of the three-part framework that I suggest could support a working model of the type of validity inquiry (applied validation study) that would put into practice the concerns—the theoretical and ethical

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demands—of current validity theory, a framework I call *critical, third-space phenomenology*. (I leave the comma in between the terms *critical* and *third-space* because one is not more central than the other; they both equally modify the particular type of phenomenological inquiry of the framework.) While Chapter Three will present the framework in greater detail, particularly as it applies to my research, I think that the most effective way for me to proceed and wrap up the present literature review is to describe the framework in enough detail here that I can show precisely where I believe it can fit in with the literature that I argue comes the closest to a validity praxis—that is, a meshing/synthesis of theory and inquiry.

**A Preview of the Framework**

   **Critical phenomenology.** As I will discuss in Chapter Three, these two terms, *critical* and *phenomenological,* do not always mesh theoretically (e.g., Creswell, 2009; Van Manen, 1990); however, I will argue that they can, especially if defined clearly up front.  By *phenomenology*, I mean inquiry that is concerned with the *lived experience* of the individual, something that I argue is key to understanding the quality— appropriateness, profitability, adequacy—of the placement decision made for or by her. I offer a phenomenological inquiry as a solution to the tendency of certain literature (presented in the previous section) to only *mention* student experience, not to investigate it, and to merely surmise about the experiences of students. I criticized this tendency as leaving important claims in a validity argument to the realm of guesswork and assumption. And, I further took issue with the way the authors seemed convinced that this type of evidence either did not need support—empirical investigation—or that the qualitative nature of the claims made empirical support impossible. This type of

investigation is precisely the domain of phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1990), which is why I argue that a framework based in phenomenology is key to a thorough validity inquiry.

I have also argued—building on Perry's (2008) CVI—that a validity inquiry without an eye toward critical theory, e.g., toward issues of hegemonic reproduction of social inequities, cannot meet the demands for examining the social consequences that, since Messick (e.g., 1989b), have been integral to a validity argument.

As an example of the need for a critical approach to validity, consider the concluding line from a case study that Royer and Gilles (1998) present as evidence of DSP's rightness (read, validity):

> Kristen's parents supported her decision, but she told them about it afterward,
> after she'd already registered. "I made the decision during orientation," she recalls.
> "I was on my own." (p. 66).

The authors do give us some sense of Kristen's lived experience, but the uncritical nature of their report is problematic, for the idea of students making such decisions purely on their own may not be such a simple matter. On one level, DSP may seem to be achieving just what Elbow (2003) claims it does when he says, "the [placement] process is no longer an institutional assessment. . . at all; control, agency, and decision making are returned entirely to the student" (pp. 22-23). What about rival explanations? Perry (2008) offered, "One rival hypothesis that a critical approach to DSP might raise is whether or not students' decision-making processes are being informed by past educational experiences with assessment, such as the ACT/SAT" (p. 154), and clearly, one could add in 12 years of grades in English courses. Further, Schendel and O'Neill (1999) read into

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the  gender issues involved, since Royer and Gilles (1998) also present the case of Jacob,

who was a lower achieving student than Kristen, but placed himself in the higher

composition course:

> To us, these stories illustrate potential problems with directed self-placement,
>
> primarily that students' past experiences with assessment-particularly those
>
> experiences that implicate their genders (or their socioeconomic status or
>
> ethnicity, information not included in the article) may be at least as influential on
>
> their decision-making process as their answers to the questions they are directed
>
> by. (p. 220).

By offering these two critical perspectives, my point is that without a critical

orientation, even a phenomenological approach may belie the truths of social forces

whose very nature is that they go unnoticed by even those who experience them.  This

problem is why I call for a *critical* phenomenology.

**Third-space positionality.** Furthermore, I suggest that a critical,

phenomenological investigation is not possible from an institutional or what I will call a

*first-space* positionality.  If the very notion of critical theory is predicated upon a critique

of the institution and the forces of social reproduction within (e.g, Bourdieu & Passeron,

1977; Foucault, 1979; Freire, 1970; cf. Creswell, 2009; Lynn et al., 2006; Perry, 2008),

then it would seem that if the institution is the one asking the questions, thorough critique

may not be possible; therefore, the positionality of the investigator becomes key.  Rather

than an institutional, first-space positionality, I argue that this type of inquiry must strive

toward a positionality that comes from a *third-space* (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, et al.,

1995; Soja, 1996), because that is where the lifeworld (the subject of phenomenological

inquiry) exists.

 As I mentioned in Chapter One, however, this positionality is not something that can simply be assumed by the researcher; as with any subjective perception on the part of the participant, one can only seek an understanding, which entails an honest and critical analysis of the data actually gathers—and a vigilance about implicit assumptions that speak more to the researcher's perception than the participants'. Through a critical discourse analysis of the interviews, therefore, I hope avoid such assumptions, and rather to argue that *third-space moments* can be seen in my interviews. So again, what I simply call *third-space* here might be more fully conceptualized as *viable attempts at* a third-space positionality. What remains crucial is that the type of insight that can be garnered from within the third-space is essential to a validation of the student's BW placement decision. (More detailed explication will be presented in Chapter Three.)

 Taken together, my overall argument is that a critical, phenomenological investigation from a third-space positionality may help us truly research issues fundamental to a validity inquiry, such Hester, et al.'s  (2007) concern:

> If a program has differentiated courses, and if placements are not accurate—that is, students are not put in the most educationally appropriate class—consequences affect the individual students, but they also ripple out from the individual to affect classes, instructors, and programs. (p. 68).

Such effects, as they ripple out, may exist on a level that will evade more quantitative, correlational analyses, yet the degree to which such factors determine the program's validity dictates that they be subject to rigorous inquiry, not left to assumption or guesswork, as was the case with several of the studies covered in the last section. Neal

and Huot (2003) put it, as stated above, "No amount of 'common sense' or administrative concern can counterbalance the need for a placement system that has a high degree of validity and thus is defensible" (p. 248). I suggest here that in order to transform what has been presented as common sense into theoretically sound and convincing validity evidence, an inquiry must be a research program (Cronbach, 1971; Kane, 2008) that must include a study with a critical, third-space phenomenological framework.

**Where Critical, Third-Space Phenomenology Fits in with the Literature**

Hester, et al. (2007) performed a longitudinal study, recognizing that "Multiple data sources need to be collected and then triangulated to determine whether students are in the most appropriate course" (p. 73), which serves as one of the closest models of a theoretically supported and thorough validation research program in the writing assessment literature. Among the sources investigated were the more traditional comparisons of placement via holistically-scored timed essay versus placement via portfolio and correlations with course grades. The researchers also included teacher satisfaction surveys and "[s]urveys of students about the adequacy of course" (p. 74). They go on to report,

> As our study also shows, readers placed students into higher level courses for all years, student grades reflected a higher success than students placed by traditional means, and student and teacher satisfaction rates were high. (p. 87).

What places this inquiry/research program closer to meeting the theoretical and ethical demands of validation (AERA, et al., 1999; Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989a, 1989b; Moss, 1992, 1994, 1996; Shepard 1993) is the recognition that "student perceptions of their placement" (p. 74) is key to a thorough validity inquiry.

O'Neill (2003) recounted William L. Smith's employment of multiple form of validity evidence, including the number of students whose teachers decided to move up during the first week of class, final course grades, teacher impressions, and scores on exit exams. O'Neill also mentioned students' impressions—collected during and especially after the course—of the degree to which the course met their needs (p. 55), which would seem to be crucial consequential evidence in determining the validity of the placement decisions. It is only the methodological approach used in gathering such impressions that I suggest should be re-evaluated, in that the data it yields might suffer from an overly institutionalized researcher positionality.

Gleason (2000), in a case study of the evaluation of a three-year pilot project in mainstreaming basic writers at City College of New York, asked, "How would remedial students. . . succeed when they were admitted directly to a full-credit writing course? And how would we best be able to demonstrate the nature and the extent of their successes and failures?" (p. 562). While I earlier took issue with her statement that transcripts are what tells us the truth of these matters, what I commend is that she mentions students' experience five separate times, all relating to the issues of *succeeding* or *failing* in full-credit writing courses, including the statement, "we found it necessary to evaluate the students' experiences in the curriculum at large as well as in the writing course itself" (p. 563). Schendel and O'Neill (1999) seem to share this sensibility, for in listing what a "validity and ethical inquiry" (p. 224) might include, they start with pass rates, demographic data of who chooses what (for DSP), teacher and student satisfaction survey, and then they continue, "data showing how and why students chose to take

particular courses" and "the impact the placement decision had on students throughout their college career" (p. 224).

These concerns for assessing success and failure not simply through grades and retention rates, but through a more qualitative sense of what the students live through, both in the composition courses themselves and in the larger curriculum, show a shared set of sensibilities with current validity theory. Gleason (2000) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999) both point out that there are data that transcripts can help us see, but that a more meaning-oriented investigation is key to a deeper understanding of what it means for someone to succeed or fail.

Along these lines, O'Neill, Schendel, and Huot (2002) said,

we need to explore what *actual benefits* students receive from their placement: Do students who are placed into basic or remedial noncredit-bearing writing courses *benefit* from this instruction? Do they remain in school? What kinds of grades do they receive when they enter intermediate and advanced courses? (p. 16, my emphases).

And more recently, Huot, O'Neill, and Moore (2010) said, "Unless decisions based on a test can demonstrate educational value for students, it is difficult to make a convincing argument for validity" (p. 509). What is implied in these statements—through terms like *actual benefits* and *educational value*—is that there is more to success and failure than quantitative measures such as grades and retention rates can say. A grade of B-, for example, might be (or feel like) a success to one student and a failure to another, depending on all kinds of other life factors that a phenomenological inquiry would seek to investigate. (And indeed, what some of my data reveals is that the actual letter grades

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sometimes *belied* the individual's lived experience as much as it might have represented another's, which could be crucial validity evidence.)

Some of the most thorough and theoretically sound composition placement validity inquiries have been undertaken by William L. Smith (1992, 1993), whose body of work is summarized (and championed) by many of the authors reviewed in this section (Hester, et al., 2007; Huot, 2002; O'Neill, Huot, and Moore, 2009; O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009; O'Neill, Schendel, & Huot, 2002).  Smith (1993) preferred the term *adequacy* to validity, but by the current definition of validity—the one used in this dissertation—Smith's research into placement adequacy is surely a validity inquiry. Smith "concluded that adequacy of placement could only be determined through multiple data sources" (O'Neill, Schendel, & Huot, 2002), which differs from Haswell's (1998) multiple lines of validity inquiry (mentioned above) in that Smith's focus here is on the *placement* and its adequacy, not just the exam itself—although Smith did extensive research on his placement procedure itself as well. Smith's primary evidence for adequacy of placement came from five sources: students moved out of BW during the first week of class; course grades; surveys of student perception of course appropriateness; teacher surveys of placement satisfaction; and exit exams, or any post-tests used in the composition program (Huot & Neal, 2006; O'Neill, Schendel, & Huot, 2002).  What my framework attempts to offer is a chance to bring in another source of student perception—one based on a richer sample from fewer respondents—as a way of further triangulating these lines of evidence, and raising even stronger counterhypotheses that could help strengthen the adequacy/validity of placement decisions in the future.

As Sternglass (1997) said,

the students' subjective lives are. . . essential components of their objective lives,

so that it is impossible to comprehend the nature of their academic experience or

to contemplate educational approaches that will meet their needs without

understanding how integrated these aspects of their experiences are. (pp. xi-xii).

This type of data is precisely what I think my framework can help access in richer ways

than other previously or currently used methods.

At the time of her book, Sternglass (1997) claimed that no previous studies had

"tak[en] into consideration nonacademic factors that influence academic performance"

(p. xiv) or had tapped into "the richness of analysis possible when full contextual factors

of individual's lives are factored into analysis of writing strategies and products" (p. 200).

Although Sternglass' book is not a validity inquiry, what she sought to discover about

what happens to college writing students throughout the years after their composition

course(s) can surely serve as a model for research into the meaning-oriented lines of

evidence I have discussed.

As a final point, almost 25 years ago, Bizzell (1986) suggested what now sounds a

lot like a third-space inquiry: in answering here question "What Happens When Basic

Writers Come to College?" She said,

[W]e need a study of basic writers similar to that conducted by [William] Perry—

a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and

the academic culture as they move on through their college educations. (p. 300).

These are the types of sensibilities and research subjects I believe my framework can

make available to a validity inquiry and argumentation.

## Chapter Two Summary

My aim in this chapter was to show the need for the study I present in this dissertation. In order to make this case, I discussed the ways in which current validity theory would support my inquiry, and I presented an overview of the literature of composition placement validation in order to show that a study like mine has yet to be undertaken.  I began with studies that seemed to miss the very definition of validity as it is currently conceived—in particular, that criterion-related evidence alone does not speak to the quality of placement decisions (e.g., Messick, 1989b). As the chapter progressed, I attempted to show how other studies had been incorporating more of the nuances of the current concept of validity, but that none had yet to employ a line of evidence from a critical, phenomenological, third-space framework, which I argue is the next step in moving the practice of validation research closer to current validity theory.

In the next chapter, I will go into more detail about this critical, third-space phenomenology,  from a methodological perspective. In that discussion, I will revisit some of the literature from this chapter in order to show more specifically how the framework I present could examine directly what some authors reviewed here have left to mere guesswork, what Neal and Huot (2003) called "common sense" (p. 248). I do so in further support of the study I present here, which seeks the very information that is likely to evade most quantitative methods used in most validation studies, and which might even escape the gaze of the most meaning-oriented studies that may have taken a first-space positionality.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

[Critical Validity Inquiry] is an attempt to develop a reflexive validation

methodology that borrows from a number of disciplines in order to cut through

the institutional cunning that re-inscribes power relations through the use of

educational assessment practices. (Perry, 2008, p. 164.)

**Chapter Three Introduction**

In Chapter Two, I argued that for a placement program to fulfill its ethical

obligations, particularly the vigilance for negative personal and social consequences, it

must employ some new methods (of a more personal, qualitative nature) in addition to

the usual evidence gathered in validity inquiries. Validity theorists such as Cronbach

(1998), Kane (2006), Messick (1989b), Moss (1994, 1998), and Shepard (1993) all

discuss the failure of numbers alone to create a thorough validity argument; and the same

theorists all call for multiple methods in a validity inquiry. In fact, Kane (2008) calls for

**"**a research program rather than a single study" (p. 78). Taken together, these two

demands (orientation toward meaning and multiplicity of methods) equal a call for

*qualitative research*, though the terms itself is rarely used in validity theory. Cronbach

(1988) does discuss an inherent difficulty in using solely quantitative research, stating,

"Program evaluators have been discussing how evidence collected in one natural

situation enables us to reason about a different one. The key seems to be qualitative

understanding (Cronbach, 1982)" (p. 12).

The point of a multimethod program of research is that no one method is assumed

to be definitive; the weaknesses of any one method can be sussed out by another (which

in turn can suss out the weaknesses of the first), what Messick (1989b) called a *Singerian* approach to validation (see also Moss, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998c). Messick warned against "the temptation to rely on only one (or, worse still, any one) category of evidence as sufficient for the validity of a particular test use" (p. 20), and touted the use of multiple methodologies since, "what is fundamental or 'given' in one inquiring system is an issue to be deliberated by another inquiring system that is observing the first one" (p. 32). So, in keeping with the major principles of validity as argument (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992), and with an argument's success resting in the plausibility of the conclusions drawn, not simply the evidence gathered, I argue with Moss (1996) that there would be no justification (e.g., concerns for standardization) for leaving out a qualitative methodology if it could add to this endeavor.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Framework**</div>

In this section, I conduct a similar explication of critical, third-space phenomenology to the one in Chapter Two, but this time the focus will be on the methodological soundness of the framework.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the most current standards of validity theory (AERA, et al., 1999; Kane, 2006) call for an investigation of (a) the meaning behind any numbers or criteria, including the raising of alternative interpretations, and (b) the use of multiple methods of inquiry; and I argue that the field is, therefore, calling for a *qualitative research* component to a validity inquiry, not to replace other evidence, but to enhance a research program, to give validators the best chance of coming to the best possible of all conclusions. In Chapter Two, I argued for the role that the lived experience of the placed students should play in arguing for the validity of a placement program.

Among the various taxonomies of qualitative research, the one most typically associated with investigating lived experience is *phenomenology* (e.g., Creswell, 1998, 2009), which is one reason why I specifically call for (and have undertaken) a phenomenological component to validity inquiry. In what follows, I describe what phenomenology entails more fully, in an attempt to strengthen the case for a phenomenological framework as a method of validity inquiry; then I describe the two crucial additional components to the framework of the present study—namely, its critical orientation, building on the work of Perry's (2008) Critical Validity Inquiry; and its focus on third-space positionality.

**Phenomenology as a Validation Methodology**

Cherryholmes (1988) said, "Phenomenological concern attends to how subjects make sense of the world. How do students, teachers, or whoever interpret social practices and situations in which they find themselves?" (p. 430). A problem I raised with most of the composition placement validation literature in Chapter Two was that the authors seemed to polarize validity evidence into what is researchable (correlations, numbers, etc.) and what is only the domain of common sense, speculation. For example, I reviewed DSP literature (Blakesley, 2002; Cornell & Newton, 2003; Nicolay, 2002; Royer & Gilles, 1998) in which the authors referred to how *good* DSP made them and the students *feel*, but left these statements more as anecdotal side notes rather than treating them as viable validity evidence. One reason why phenomenology is particularly well suited as a line of validity evidence is because, as Van Manen (1990) said, "[phenomenology] is a systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience" (p. 11). In other words, a phenomenological framework can help us see that lived experience does not have to be relegated to the domain of mere common sense.

Though I argue that phenomenology and validation are particularly well suited to one another, it is exceedingly rare that theoretical works on validity *phenomenology,* though Moss (1998) and Cherryholmes (1988) both do; and I have seen no study explicitly attempt to use a phenomenological investigation as evidence in a validity inquiry. Below I present three specific principles that I believe link phenomenological inquiry (primarily as conceptualized within  fields of qualitative research, as opposed to philosophy) with the current state of validity theory.

**Phenomenology as meaning-oriented and never-ending.**  A recurring notion covered in Chapter Two concerned *meaning* is a major concern of validity theory (e.g., Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1998; Shepard, 1993), such that, without a plausible interpretation of what assessment data mean, and without the consideration of rival interpretations, a placement program cannot claim that the decisions made on the students' behalf are valid. One implication is that there is no such thing as a definitive or finalized conclusion of validity (Cronbach, 1971, 1988; Gorin, 2007; Huot, 2002; Kane, 1992; Shepard, 1993; Sireci, 2007). In Cronbach's (1988) own words, "because psychological and educational tests influence who gets what in society, fresh challenges follow shifts in social power or social philosophy. *So validation is never finished*" (p. 5, Cronbach's emphasis).  Downing (2003), writing in the field of medical education, pointed out that the "higher the stakes associated with assessments, the greater the requirement for validity evidence from multiple sources, collected on an ongoing basis and continually re-evaluated" (p. 831).

A brief look at how qualitative research scholars describe phenomenology shows a great similarity to these conceptions. Van Manen (1990) said, "Phenomenological *questions are meaning questions*.  They ask for the meaning and significance of certain

phenomena. Meaning questions cannot be 'solved' and thus done away with" (p. 23, italics original). These lines could easily be found in a major validity work like Messick (1989b) or Kane (2006).

> Carini (1975) described phenomenology this way:
>
> Where logic "exhausts" the meaning of the object through the completion of the predictive process and the mathematical formulation of the phenomenon, phenomenological inquiry increasingly thickens the meaning of the phenomenon as it reveals the multiplicity of the internal reciprocities that constitute the phenomenon's integrity. (p. 11).

And more recently, Lincoln (2010) said, "Phenomenological inquiry has as its goal deep understanding of some phenomenon, with no mandate for prediction or control" (p. 6).

Taken together, there is a very similar underlying set of sensibilities emerging between validity theory and (at least my reading of) phenomenological inquiry. Both entail a continuous and dynamic search for meaning and for more and more plausible conclusions (since *truth* as the binary opposite of *falsehood* seems far too rigid a concept where meaning is concerned) drawn from all the evidence we can gather.

**Transparency of assumptions in phenomenology.** Another statement from Van Manen (1990) reads,

> The methodology of phenomenology is such that it posits an approach toward research that aims at being presuppositionless; in other words, this is a methodology that tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project. (p. 29).

This is another way of  acknowledging that in a research enterprise it is often our implicit

assumptions (presuppositions) that guide what is found as much as it is the inherent

nature of the object of study (Kane, 2001; Kuhn, 1996), so the more an inquiry can rid

itself of this tendency the better.  Such an attempt to unpack assumptions is clearly an

issue for validation because, as major validity theorists know (e.g., Kane, 1992; Moss,

1994), if a programs' *implicit assumptions* are placing students, rather than the construct

of how well their writing abilities and potential match up with curriculum's courses, a

major source of test invalidity (*construct-irrelevant variance*, e.g., AERA, et al., 1999;

Messick, 1989b) is occurring.

Kane (1992, 2001, 2006, 2008) consistently states that the first step in validation

is constructing an interpretive argument as an explicit statement of purposes and

assumptions, and he attributes this notion back to Cronbach and Meehl's (1995) first

work on construct validity. Kane (1992) said, "One of the main reasons for stating the

argument clearly and for examining the inferences in some detail is to identify the

assumptions being made" (p. 528) because "[w]ithout the discipline imposed by an

explicitly stated interpretive argument, it is easy to make claims based on implicit

assumptions" (Kane, 2006, p. 26). Within these statements lies an even more fundamental

notion: one must be *explicit* because one can never be fully *free* from assumptions; if the

researchers is at the very least explicit, this allows others to possibly point out

conclusions based on assumptions that they could not see at the time.  And this clearly

reflects Messick's (1989b) point, cited above, that "what is fundamental or 'given' in one

inquiring system is an issue to be deliberated by another inquiring system that is

observing the first one" (p. 32), and thus the connection between the need for multiple

methods of inquiry and the concern for rooting out implicit assumptions—or, that which

is "given" or "what is fundamental" to one "inquiring system" (Messick, 1989b).

*Connection to qualitative/lived experience research.* This notion of being as

explicit as possible about as many assumptions as possible is also a prevalent concern in

qualitative research, which I suggest is more evidence that a validity inquiry needs to

incorporate qualitative data.  Devers and Frankel (2000), for example, call for more open

discussion of, and being more explicit about, qualitative research design, which Demerath

(2006) calls  "greater transparency in methodology" (p. 105), and Suri and Clarke (2009)

call "audience-appropriate transparency" (p. 419). Carspecken (1996) says qualitative

researchers need to be more explicit about their social ontology; and Mehra (2001),

performing a more personal inquiry, mentioned how knowing herself and being more

aware of her interests were the first steps in her study. Shank and Villella (2004) also say

researchers must explicitly examine assumptions, attempting to spell out even the

unexamined ones; and Soobrayan (2003) says that, since there's no one set of guiding

rules, qualitative researchers must constantly reflect and be explicit about ethics and truth

in their research. Further, Giangreco and Taylor (2003) put it, "Qualitative researchers

seek to be keenly aware of how their personal perspectives and experiences influence

what they report as findings" (p. 135).

This notion of the harm that implicit assumptions may cause leads directly into

the *critical* nature of phenomenological framework I present here, because critical

theories tend to be those that seek out the harm caused by the ongoing, yet often implicit

forces such as power and privilege (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak &

Meyer, 2009).  But before that discussion, a brief explication of how critique and

phenomenology have both worked together and historically clashed.

**Critique within phenomenology.** I begin this subsection with statements made about phenomenology that I find problematic, for they serve to reject what I see as its fundamentally critical nature, and I want to be explicit about this up front. First, Creswell (2009) said,

> Understanding the "lived experiences" marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In this process, the researcher "brackets" his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study (Nieswiadomy, 1993). (p. 13).

This statement echoes Van Manen's (1990) claim that phenomenology examines "the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it." (p. 9). Both of these statements are problematic for my framework because I take (and the present study takes) the view of human experience that it is fluid, dynamic, dialectical and dialogical; that it does not rest in completed form within one's mind, but it is constantly up for re-construction and re-negotiation with others and within the self (e.g. Flower, 1994; Mehra, 2001). As Kvale (1999) said, "In postmodern and phenomenological philosophy, there is an emphasis on knowledge as interrelational and structural, interwoven in networks. Knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exits in the relationship between person and world" (p. 101).

Other qualitative researchers discuss the the "always dialectical" (Mehra, 2001) nature of human research: Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) reject the view of "social science researcher as potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled (p. 108), whose experience, that is, ought to be "bracketed." Mehra also discusses "an epistemological break from the positivist insistence on researcher neutrality and objectivity" (p. 77), saying, "If a researcher seeks to understand human experience, he or she must be in a constant, sensitive, and dialogical relationship with other humans (p. 69). And Toma (2000) said, "As interactions between researchers and subjects deepen (epistemology), data about our phenomena and people—and the interpretations that result from that data—become better (ontology)" (p. 181).

So while the term *phenomenology*, to some, implies a bracketing of the researcher's experience in order to gain unfettered access to the subject's experience (which therefore exists as a finished product), this is not what the term implies to everyone, and not what it implies to me.

This distinction may simply be a matter of a Husserlian school of thought—with a Cartesian perspective of the mind and experience, seeing them as existing in fairly concrete form—versus more of a Heideggerian school that would see experience as more of a social co-creation—though these terms would not appear until much later (see Pierre, 1999). I feel the need to make this point explicit because I want the reader at the outset to be assured that I do see this framework as phenomenological, even though I view lived experience as something dialectically co-created/negotiated (e.g., Flower, 1994), not something that necessarily has a pure, pre-reflective truth.

To keep such matters clear, I use the qualifier *critical* before *phenomenology* to assert that, while I intend *not* to bracket my experience, I fully consider my approach to be phenomenological because my intention is to investigate the lived experiences of my participants in any form in which they surface, even as they change and grow in light of newer insights and experiences.

**Critical Theory**

"Critical Theory" . . . indicates that social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society, in contrast to traditional theory oriented solely toward understanding or explaining it. (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 6).

Critical theory as a framework of validation research is only starting to surface by name in the literature (e.g., Perry, 2008), though I have argued that its roots actually appear in the long-held concern for refuting rival hypotheses (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1998; Shepard, 1993). In what follows, I argue that a close reading of validity literature shows fundamental connections between critical theory and validity theory, and that such a reading will further show that one cannot make a sufficient case for validity without addressing key critical issues.

A critical perspective is also not unusual in qualitative research. Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, and Mitchell (2006) discuss critical theory as "an analysis of power relations. In other words, critical theorists ask, 'What constitutes power?' Who holds it?' and 'In what ways is it utilized to benefit those already in power?'" (p. 18), a statement that clearly shows concern for the issues of reproduction that Perry (2008) discusses and Blakesley (2002) mentions. Carspecken (1996) said that critical theory is concerned with "the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency" (p. 3). And Creswell

(1998) lists critical theory as one of his five traditions of qualitative research, defining it as, "scientific study of social institutions and their transformations through interpreting the meaning of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles" (p. 80). A more *critical* critical theorist would probably remove that semicolon after the term "social life," for critically oriented scholars in fields like sociology (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), linguistics (e.g., Gee, 1989), and education (e.g., Freire, 1970) would more likely argue that "the meaning of social life" *is* "the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggle" (Creswell, 1998, p. 80), that there is no understanding of social life that fails to involves these matters.

**Critical phenomenology.** As much as I tout a phenomenological component of a validity inquiry, I also argue that without critique, it is simply not enough to ward off  (to raise and then refute) the possibilities of hegemonically reproductive forces, the very insipid nature of which is that they trick even the experiencer herself to believe they do not exist. So simply asking a student placed into Basic Writing about her experience of the placement and course, without a critical framework, may only serve to help reinforce her sense of complacency. As Blakesley (2002) put it,

> By the time they reach the university, most students in the United States have grown accustomed to being identified as empty vessels, and so there is normally little resistance to the drudgery of college entrance exams, writing placement tests, or any of the other battery of tests that the institution uses to identify just how empty students might be. (p. 15).

So an non-critical investigation of her experience may equally reflect (a) this internalized drudgery, or (b) this participant's genuine feeling that the decision was right for her (if,

that is the two can be separated).  A critical perspective is needed in order to help sort this out, to take it out of the realm of what I have been calling guesswork or common sense.

I point out the particular need for a critical component within phenomenology because, as I said in the last chapter, even a that study does include student experience as evidence of validity, such as Royer & Gilles' (1998) case studies, must still keep an eye toward issues of social reproduction of power that may unwittingly be fostered by assessment (Perry, 2008), such as the unexamined gender issues that Royer and Gilles' cases suggest to some (e.g., Schendel & O'Neill, 1999).  For my study, a critical lens as part of phenomenology not only implies that the lived experience of the participant is understood to be a fluid, negotiated, dynamic process, but also that, in line with critical theory, my investigation always seeks to reveal underlying social forces that may serve as Blakesley (2002) put it, "hegemonically, to preserve the status quo" (p. 10), which I argue would be a strong case of unintended negative social (societal) consequences (Messick, 1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994), and which would therefore call the validity of the placement decisions into question.

In the framework I present here, critique also applies both to the data collection and analysis.  The lived experience(s) of the subject are taken as the baseline truth from which we work to understand the meaning behind the the placement decision.  But the critical component entails that there are likely forces outside of the experiencer's perception that may become evidence only in critical analysis (e.g., van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). I will return to data analysis at the end of this chapter.

**Third-space Positionality**

"The figure of the observer is central to any form of inquiry, since it is inevitably through an observer that a datum must be represented" (Carini, 1975, p. 8).

A last part of this framework deals with the issue of researcher (and therefore, subject) positionality. The dialectical nature of social identities (e.g., Mehra, 2001; Toma, 2000) helps ensure that the assumed role of one interlocutor almost inevitably shapes the role of the other interlocutor (e.g., Gee, 2003, 2004). In Chapter Two, I argued that, even though some validity inquiries did their best to incorporate the experience of the placed students, none attempted to assume a non-institutional (third-space) positionality. The notion of researcher positionality asserts that the social identity I assume (or perhaps, exude) when I ask a question—a professor, a grad student, a roommate, a parent—will have a great impact on the social identity the participant assumes, and therefore on the types of answers she may be willing to give, or even to come to realize (e.g., Gutierrez, et al., 1995; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2005; van Dijk, 2009). This is why I have argued that a validation program wishing to incorporate the lived experience of placed students must aim at a third-space positionality because the responses from the subjects do not only come from individual-qua-student, but also from other crucial social identities that make up the greater individual as a whole.

This section will have two parts: first I will discuss the notion of positionality, and then I will more specifically discuss the concept of *third-space* and how it applies to the present study and framework.

**Researcher positionality.** Researcher positionality, again, refers to the notion of who I am (my social identity) when I ask questions/engage in conversation, for I always

am somebody. Having a researcher positionality is not a choice; there is no neutral, or *non-positionality*; there is only undisclosed or unexamined, unconscious positionality. As van Dijk (2009) put it, "Participants speak and listen as women, mothers, lawyers, party members, or company executives" (p. 82). That is, they are always somebody. A survey given to students about their course or placement satisfaction, for example, has positionality; a structured interview has positionality. However, the researchers may not explicitly address the notion. Yet, for an inquiry interested in critical issues of power and social reproduction, Knight (2000) argues that "focus on self and positionality allows researchers to confront and consider the processes of situating oneself in a conscious manner that examines the nuances of relationships of power" (p. 171). So for a *critical* investigation, a conscious, explicit notion of researcher positionality is key.

Since there is always going to be positionality, the only question is how consciously an inquiry will use the researcher positionality to better and to enrich its data (Giangreco & Taylor, 2003). The choice to assume *no* positionality is really, the choice to assume an institutional, *outsider* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hellawell, 2006), first-space positionality.

As Toma (2000) said, "As interactions between researchers and subjects deepen (epistemology), data about our phenomena and people—and the interpretations that result from that data—become better (ontology)" (p. 181). This statement seems to be the heart of the matter in becoming conscious of one's positionality as a researcher. A validity inquiry needs the richest possible data in order to draw the strongest conclusions about the quality a placement program; and if a polarity between the school-people and the placed students is standing in the way of richer data, then there no theoretical justification

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for letting it stand. While I know of nothing in the validity literature specifically on researcher positionality, predominant is the notion that anything short of the best attempt to gather all possible evidence for or against the conclusions of an assessment is a threat to a validity argument (Cronbach, 1988; Crooks & Kane, 1993; Kane, 1992, 2006; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1994, 1996; Shepard, 1993). So if conceiving of the "researcher as potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled" (Fine, et al., 2000, p. 108) forces a positionality that stands in the way of potential, potent validity evidence, then the validity inquiry (research program) will need to add in lines of evidence that serve as what Mehra (2001) called "an epistemological break from the positivist insistence on researcher neutrality and objectivity" (p. 77).

**The third-space.** The notion of third-space (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, et al., 1995b; Soja, 1996) comes in as a metaphor for that place *other than* the duality of researcher and subject, insider and outsider, self and other, etc. As I use it here, I consider third-space to be more like the hallways than the classroom—that space between the bells when the students and teachers are just people for a few moments. Third-space is a useful concept whenever there are two potentially *othering* cultural groups (Kubota, 2001; Palfreyman 2005), whether it be nations or races (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, et al., 1995a; Soja, 1996), language communities (Pratt, 1991), or, I argue, the school-people and the students, for as Bhabha (1994) first put it, "by exploring this third space, we may elude the politics of polarity" (p. 56).

*Scripts and counterscripts.* Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson (2005) build on Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson's (1995) notion of *scripts* (though the term was used

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earlier; see Schank & Abelson, 1975)*, and how they both create and are created by, these spaces/positionalities. The authors show that there is the script of the institution, the script of the home, the script of the student in all her social identities; there are transcendent scripts and counter-scripts. But the goal of entering the third-space is the hope that the students will "speak to us outside of the traditional student-teacher script," because entering "[a] third space where scripts intersect creates potential for authentic interaction and a shift in what counts as knowledge" (Gutierrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995, p. 445). They go on to say,

> When a true dialogue between students and teacher occurs, rather than random associations between their scripts, a new transitional, less rigidly scripted space— the third space—is created . . . . [I]n this unscripted third space. . . student and teacher cultural interests, or internal dialogizations, become available to each other . . . [and] actual cross-cultural communication is possible. (p. 445).

I suggest that such true dialogue is needed in a thorough validity inquiry, because most placement programs are (at the very least metaphorically) in need of cross-cultural communication between the school-people and first year writing students. A true validity inquiry, as currently conceived, must seek to find out what is really going on with the student, but I argue that this reality is not contained in a student's transcript, as when Gleason (2000) suggested that transcripts "tell us what really happens, what courses students really take, the credits and grades they really earn, the degrees they really finish and when those degrees are awarded" (vii).

To me, the term *really* would denote the lived experience(s) of being placed into Basic Writing in this institution, in this *person's* life, educationally, socially, and

emotionally. In order to reach this end, validation research must attempt to gain access to the culture of the campus—what Gutierrez, Larson, and Kreuter (1995) and Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) call the *underlife*—the very culture that is likely hidden the moment the school-people enter the room. For this to be done, I argue that it must seek a third-space positionality from which to investigate the impact of the placement decisions on actual students. As Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) warn, an inquiry from a first-space positionality into the lived experience of the students may generate more of a "random associations between their scripts" (p. 445) than a true dialogue, which is my fear in reading validity inquiries that do not reveal explicit interviewing methodology in investigating data from students' lived experiences.

Just as Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) sought to engage in true dialogue with their subject—to break out of the traditional teacher-student script—so I attempted to engage in true dialogue with my participants to the extent possible. But it must be noted that I have no authority so speak for how any of my participants genuinely perceived my social/researcher identity. Earlier I mentioned some ways through which I felt I could connect to my participants as individuals, rather than as individual-qua-student; further, I tried to be explicit about the problematic nature of my simply assuming that these individuals saw me as anything other than just another school-person.  My hope is that by leaving my perceived positionality open to argument and objection, I may be able to avoid mere supposition of how the participants perceive my researcher identity, and hopefully be able to find moments when we were genuinely off-script, in the third-space.

**Section Summary**

In sum, then, (a) the validity of a test comes into question when it is serving to reproduce social ills (Cronbach, 1988); and (b) without a critical line of investigation a validity inquiry is not doing all it can to uncover unintended negative social consequences (Perry, 2008) that would clearly serve as rival hypotheses to any apparent good the program is doing; (c) furthermore, even with a critical component, a solely institutional researcher positionality could produce what Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) call a random association of scripts, as opposed to a true dialogue, in which case even a phenomenological approach would leave plausible rival counter-explanations untapped. Therefore, a framework that addresses all of these concerns, a *critical, third-space phenomenology*, when employed as an additional methodology to more traditional validation research methods, could help supply the type of evidence needed for the most thorough possible validity inquiry.

**Examples of What this Framework Could be Used to Investigate**

I now present specific examples of claims from the placement literature that are indeed researchable, claims that should no longer be justifiably left as what Neal and Huot (2003) called common sense, for I suggest that the framework I present here could help transform them into vital validity evidence. I will cite examples from three pieces, which all happen to be about DSP. I chose these pieces because of the nature of the statements they make: all of these claims *could* serve as a starting point to discover exemplary validity evidence that meets the theoretical standards of the field (as outlined throughout Chapters 2 and 3), but all are currently left to the domain of assumption, projection, common sense, and thereby serve as little more than side notes or guesswork.

So it's really the potential within these works that draws me to them.

**Royer and Gilles (1998)**

In Chapter Two, I mentioned the irony that Royer and Gilles (1998) were essentially performing a phenomenological validity inquiry into DSP, since their major sources of evidence that DSP worked all concerned how the students and faculty *felt* about the procedure. But because since they did not recognize it as either validity or phenomenology, they treated their claims as anecdotal matters of common sense rather than viable validity evidence capable of systematic investigation (Van Manen, 1990). Furthermore, while they claimed to be revealing the lived experiences of those on campus—the students, the faculty—I argue that they were truly only revealing *their own* experience of what these others experienced, which I would call either an assumption or a projection of their own feelings.

Yet, as I said above, their paper is so interesting because if they *had* actually researched and presented this evidence for (and refuted rival hypotheses against) these claims, they could have produced a highly successful validity argument for DSP, something absent in the literature (Gere, et al., 2010; Neal & Huot, 2003; Perry, 2008). What follows are some examples of claims Royer and Gilles (1998) made that I argue could have been known, researched, and substantiated through a framework of critical, third-space phenomenology.

Royer and Gilles (1998) stated:

It pleases students to know that they are in charge of their learning. It may be the most important message they receive at freshman orientation. (p. 65).

A statement like this—with no empirical research to support it—presents what the

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authors feel, even perhaps what they project onto a student, but nothing of the messages

that might be received by students themselves.  A phenomenological inquiry, especially

from a third-space positionality, could indeed substantiate—or refute—such claims.  But,

as left on the page, we must wonder (a) how they know the students are pleased, (b)

which students are and are not pleased, (c) whether the students do indeed feel they are in

charge of their learning—or whether that is a wishful projection on the authors' part—and

(d) what messages students actually believed themselves to have received.

Later, Royer and Gilles (1998) said:

The sense of rightness comes to students who make their own decisions in a

matter like this and when they vow to affirm through hard work that the right

decision has been made. (p. 65).

Again, Royer and Gilles are correct in affirming that data like this is unhelpful to

validation (I mention in Chapter Two that they had said they passed over matters of

*validity* in favor of matters of *rightness*, and therefore believe that their statements were

not validity evidence.)  However, this data is only unhelpful to validation because, as

presented here, it remains an *assumption* of the experience of the students from the

viewpoint of institutional representatives, not an argument (which validity must be).  If

the actual students' experience were investigated (with all that entails), such data could be

be strong validity evidence, for as I mentioned in Chapter Two, validity and what Royer

and Gilles (1998) call rightness are much more conceptually linked than the authors seem

aware.

Finally, Royer and Gilles (1998) claimed:

[S]tudents who believe that ENG 098 is the best course for them *are happy to*

*have the opportunity* to improve themselves and pleased to possess the *dignity* of

making such a choice for themselves. (p. 65, my emphasis).

Matters of happiness and dignity are clearly within the domain of validity, particularly the

concern for social and personal consequences; and therefore, if examined, such matters

could be presented as convincing evidence. Royer and Gilles (1998) do not reveal how

they know these statements to be true, and therefore, they have little more weight than

supposition.  In terms of bringing validation practice up to validity theory standards, I

find the treatment of this claim all the more disappointing because of the exemplar it

could have been by weaving such positive personal consequences into a validity

argument.

**Blakesley (2002)**

Throughout the these last chapters, I have cited a couple of passages that

Blakesley (2002) presented regarding the critical notion of reproduction of marginalized

social identities, as well as hegemony within an educational institution.  While I value

these insights, especially as they come from a DSP advocate—a topic where the literature

generally tends to overlook critical issues, as discussed above—I am troubled by other

statements within the piece; and, I argue that my framework could help such statements

become viable validity evidence.

Blakesley (2002) claimed:

[DSP] communicated the positive message to students that we respected their

judgment. We felt that if students chose to take the basic writing course, rather

than be forced to take it, that the classroom dynamic would improve dramatically,

an important factor in a course in which students' attitudes toward writing is so

crucial to writing growth. (p. 21).

As the findings in Chapters 4 and 5 will show, there is a great danger that comes with assuming what messages are being received by incoming students. A program may know what it intends its messages to say, but without an investigation, it cannot say for sure what messages were actually communicated to, or received by, the students; it can only assume. Only the students themselves can speak to this matter. If the students had indeed received the messages mentioned by Blakesley, such data could help make a strong validity argument, and this is why I suggest validation research must seek to substantiate these types of claims.

Blakesley (2002) also said:

In the end, I believe, a writing program that successfully implements directed self-placement will find its effects showing up in instructor training, instructor-student relations, instructor and student attitudes, and, of course, student performance. The consequences of our placement methods run far deeper than we might initially presume. (p. 12).

Once again, if these claims were substantiated with empirical research—which I argue would take the type of framework I present here—they would constitute a highly valuable contribution to a validity argument. But, outside of student performance, to the extent that it is measurable through grades, there is no hint here as to how he might transform these statements from common sense into viable evidence for a validity argument. Further, a statement like, "Our surveys of student attitudes, however, showed that students overwhelmingly valued their right to choose their writing course" (p. 28) is good evidence, but does not go far enough to support the type of claims made in the

passage above, partly because of the first-space nature of the research instruments.

A final statement from Blakesley (2002) reads:

[W]e felt that directed self-placement could not only positively transform the

learning space of the basic writing class, but also that it would make placement a

far less dismal affair than it normally is. (p. 21).

If a program truly achieved these claims, it would almost be hard to imagine

stronger validity evidence in line with current validity theory, especially theorists like

Moss (1994, 1996), Messick (1989b), and Shepard (1993). If a placement program could

genuinely "transform the learning space of the basic writing class," what better positive

social consequences, on this particular campus, could one ask for?  By presenting a

working model of validity inquiry as a *social enterprise* (Cronbach, 1988; Huot, 2002;

Kane, 1992; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1994, 1996; Perry 2008; Schendel, 2000) the

framework I present could truly show a paradigmatic shift from the old view of validity

as the accuracy of a test to test validation as a genuine social force.  Imagine if the

placement system itself not only served the students well individually, but even

encouraged such transformations, or better yet, served the students well *via* the

encouragement of such transformation.  Such a scenario would be a sure example of

validity *as* education in action, not simply a list of correlations or the accuracy of what a

test measures.

Blakesley (2002) continued by discussing "the ways that directed self-placement

might function to reshape institutional contexts and conversations" (p. 12), which again

invokes Messick's (1989b) notion of the social consequences (but the *positive* side) in a

way that few validation studies have accomplished.  Unfortunately, however, if these

statements are relegated to the domain of supposition, common sense, untested

hypothesis, projection, assumption, and the like, none of the true principles of validity

theory is achieved.  Through a critical, third-space phenomenological inquiry, I suggest

we can support these ideas.

**Cornell and Newton (2003)**

Finally, Cornell and Newton (2003) also make claims that could be the very

exemplar of theoretically sound validity evidence, but only if such claims were

investigated and substantiated. For example:

The students who identify themselves as basic writers fall below the academic

mark set by those that mainstream themselves most likely for dispositional and

cultural reasons—traits of motivation, self-esteem, acculturation, and maturity.

Those dispositions may become intensified or complicated by the choice—or the

imposition—of a basic writing identity. (Cornell & Newton, 2003, pp. 171-172).

If the authors knew about these student identity matters definitively, consider how

much it would affect the validity of their placement program. Cornell and Newton

themselves said, "We would abandon our DSP program if we could show that students

who chose to avoid College Writing I were disadvantaged in a practical way by their

choice" (p. 166).  Yet, I would strongly suggest that if the dispositions listed above were

to become intensified because of—even the choice of—a basic writing identity, this

occurrence would qualify as quite a practical disadvantage, unless the word *practical* is

meant to imply that which is discernible from a transcript. So when the authors

"hypothesize that the self-placement choices reflect additional factors, such as 'self-

efficacy' [. . .], writing apprehension, or some other as yet undetermined factor" (p. 165),

they fail to produce a solid validity argument; they must actually investigate the extent to which this is the case if they are to claim validity for their program. Again, the framework I present here is designed specifically to research such phenomena.

In addition, Cornell and Newton (2003) claimed:

[T]he data *cannot show* whether that persistence [a student's retention] is a result of taking the College Writing I course or a function of the same personality characteristics that might have led a student to elect the course in the first place. (p. 150, emphasis added).

I argue this is a limitation of the data collection methods, not an inherently unreseachable nature of the subject matter. In other words, it is not the data themselves that cannot show whether this is the case; it is the researchers who have yet to make a compelling argument, premised upon multiple lines and methods of inquiry.

Finally, Cornell and Newton (2003) asserted:

What we can say is that students are *virtually universally satisfied* with their right to choose the level at which they will begin our writing program, and the students who elect the first course *value it for itself*—for the experience that the course provides—more than they value it as a prerequisite for their success in the writing program. (p. 150, emphases added).

If such feelings of satisfaction were indeed shown to be the case, I suggest that this statement—as a *conclusion* reached on the basis of convincing evidence, not simply as a statement or projection—would be a very strong line of validity evidence. However, the authors never reveal by what authority they can make these statements. Even the subject heading "What Do the At-Risk Students Think?" (p. 174), which seems to be just

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what they need to explore, ends up displaying what I see as a fairly flawed and easily

refutable method, in which the asked students to "fill out a questionnaire on their

attitudes toward the courses they had placed themselves in and on the elective nature of

College Writing I" (p. 174). It is not that questionnaires themselves are poor research

instruments; but in terms of supporting the type of claim presented here (and the type

needed for a strong validity argument), the questionnaires that Cornell and Newton

(2003) present are not sufficient, both because of their first-space positionality and

because they will only support one hypothesis, not help raise plausible rival explanations.

**Section Summary**

The last section attempted to demonstrate how the framework of a critical, third-

space phenomenology could be used to investigate and present validity evidence that

heretofore has been left as supposition, even within much of the literature presented in

Chapter Two that did seek student experience as validity evidence.  In what follows, I

begin to apply this framework toward to the study presented in Chapters Four and Five.  I

show moments of participant interviews where I believe my framework was indeed

helping me gather data that the authors mentioned above left hypothetical. First, I

describe the method of participant selection and the more theoretical methodology of the

interviews, and then I  more specifically discuss the interview methods, with excerpts

intended to demonstrate the value of my three-part framework.

<div align="center">

**The Study**

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**Participant Selection**

After securing institution review board approval, I contacted each Basic Writing

instructor at UWA to ask for permission to speak to each class during the second week of

school in the fall of 2009 (See Appendix C). During that time, I asked the instructor to leave the room, then I told the students about my study. I passed around consent forms (See Appendix A) and asked that they return them to a box, either blank or with their signature and information if they wished to participate. I tried then to communicate my agenda: that I was curious about how they felt about being placed in Basic Writing, and that I was concerned that too many schools just proceeded with placement programs without ever *really* consulting students. I wanted them to know that I was a student as well, that I was not part of the faculty. I hoped that by asking their teacher to leave the room and by attempting to share my concern that their voiced be heard—and my enthusiasm for the topic—that the students would feel comfortable in signing up to let their voice be heard in my study, and that I would actually listen.

In total, I received 34 signatures, of which 10 replied to my initial request for an interview. Most of these initial interviews took place during the third and fourth week of the semester. In the second round of interviews, toward the second week in October, I saw my participant pool shrink a little bit, with two initial participants no longer responding to my emails. I met with the remaining participants two-to-three more times throughout the semester, and then with four of them during the fifth week of the spring 2010 semester (three had not returned to UWA, and one more stopped responding to my emails). So some participants ended up giving me a longitudinal perspective on their placement, and let me see how their experience shifted or did not as time went on; others only gave me an initial snapshot of what it was like to be placed and therefore to *be* a Basic Writing student at UWA. Both types of information yielded very interesting insights. In my report, I use eight of the participants, all of whom gave me a sufficient

picture of their experience to present valuable insight for the study.

I realize that the very nature of the study and of my selection method would draw some and turn away other possible participants. However, I found more diverse perspectives on the placement than I had anticipated, including two participants who even told me that they did not have any reason for doing my study—they just signed the form without really listening to what it was about (and still somehow got as far as the interviewing process with me). In retrospect, I realize that I could have pitched to the students the notion of them as co-researchers instead of participants, but this again would likely have affected who did and did not volunteer.

**Interviewing Methodology**

I mentioned earlier that, in line with Mehra (2001) and others (Gee, 2003, 2004; Toma, 2000), I see a necessarily dialectical relationship between researcher and research subject. As Tanggaard (2009) (building on the work of Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) said,

> The central analytical unit [of the interview] is not a bounded and static self but rather the diverse discursive repertories spoken by persons within particular social settings; that is, interviewing provides a context for revealing how language "makes" people, produces and changes social life. (p. 1499).

Within my framework, I needed to enter the interviews as real-life conversations, not as verbal questionnaires. For as Fontana and Frey (2000) said, the unstructured interview "attempts to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (p. 653). So rather than having a pre-determined agenda of topics, I decided that—after reminding the participant of the agenda of my overall study, and entering into the topic of how it

feels/felt to be placed in Basic Writing—I needed to listen and respond, to tell the participant what I was hearing and give them things to think about, share my experiences, tell them how I would have felt in circumstances that they lived through, and so forth. This approach is similar to what Rubin and Rubin (2005) call *responsive interviewing*. But, there is a difference: I not only sought *clarification* of what my participant meant (therefore asking probing questions in response to her responses); I sought also to *complicate*, for the interviewee, what she may have meant—by which I mean getting the participant to think more about what she has said, particularly when I felt or observed inconsistencies or felt her slipping into *scripted* responses. The notion that lived-experience is not over just because the *event* may be in the past is a fundamental premise of my interviewing methodology. In terms of validating someone's placement decision (the event), the way that her experience of that decision develops—even the way she may look back upon it differently as her life and education proceed—is highly relevant validity evidence.

My methodology is a form of postmodern interviewing (Fontana, 2003; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Gubrium and Holstien, 2003), for "[p]ostmodernism," say Gubrium and Holstien (2003), "casts doubt on *any* totalizing or exhaustive theories or explanations" (p. 4, italics original), a statement which clearly fits the notion of validity as a recursive process that is never finalized (Cronbach, 1971, 1988; Gorin, 2007; Kane, 1992; Moss, 1998; Shepard, 1993; Sireci, 2007), and an orientation that I feel is crucial to the type of investigation I present here. As Fontana (2003) pointed out, though, there is no one *postmodern interviewing* method; it is more of a shared set of sensibilities and concerns. So, while I certainly consider my method to be in line with postmodern ideas, I both

hesitate to label it as such, and argue that even if I did, I might not be saying very much about my actual methods.

I also see my methods as a *psychodynamic approach*; for in psychodynamic therapy, the therapist's/interviewer's goal is to push the analysand's thinking beyond the surface, perhaps even to thoughts that are uncomfortable, but never to *insert* ideas and perspectives that are not genuinely part of the subject's experience. As Newman and Holzman (1999) said, "Psychodynamic and constructivist therapists influenced by narrative ideas listen in order to gain access to what is, supposedly, behind the story" (p. 36). Taken together with the postmodern sensibility that this story itself is not a rigid, finalized entity, but one that is fluid, dynamic, and furthermore, negotiated in the process of its telling and retelling—this passage helps describe the methodology (that is, the theoretically underpinnings of the actual methods) of my interviewing approach.

**Interviewing Method**

In this section, I describe the actual methods I employed in my interviews (which I will also call *conversations*). I will briefly discuss three issues: (1) how I led off and framed the interviews, (2) how I tried to enter the third-space (and some evidence that I may have), and (3) examples of how and when I would push beyond initial responses or perspectives when I felt it necessary and appropriate. I then discuss what I think this particular method helped excavate that would much less likely come to the surface without this type of dialogical, dynamic approach.

(Note, in the excerpts I present, I use questions marks [?] to both signify a question, and a question-like upturn in pitch, even if it's a statement. Also, I use a slash [/] to indicate a pause that I think is longer than an ellipse […] implies. Further, I refer to

myself in the interviews by name [Josh, or J], not as "Interviewer," partly to avoid that notion of the neutral, objective researcher that I discussed above. Also, all names are pseudonyms.)

**Openings, (un)structure, and transparency.** I began most interviews with some kind of statement about the nature of my interviews themselves, specifically stating that I had no set of questions, but that I wanted to just talk about the experience and feelings about the Basic Writing placement decision. For example (I am putting quotation marks around my statements to emphasize that these were the statements actually spoken, not anything that was pre-established),

*From Dawn 1:*

"These are pretty unstructured. I'm just trying to get a feel for what people are thinkin', experiencing in the um, placement decision, you know?" And later "Part of what I'm doing here is, I'm not just asking questions, like I want us to *talk* ... I do not know if that makes sense."

*From Sam 1, part 1:*

"The way I'm doing these? I don't have a, like a check list of questions? Like I just, um… I don't know if you remember the point of my study, but I'm really trying to get, like… inside the experience you know?"

*From Renee 1:* (Sitting on a bench in the quad.)

"These are pretty informal, like I / purposely do not have / like, a list of questions? I mean, there are some things that / hopefully, I'll ask? But... I really just wanna get a sense of your feeling? About the whole... Like, all the issues—I mean my main / question is the placement decision."

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[Note, the participant continually back-channels with "Yeah"s throughout.]

I realized, further, that establishing an agenda is not something that should be seen as a one-time matter.  I needed to allow for a participant's perspective on the placement, and on their view of my agenda, to change and grow as the semester proceeded.

*From Renee 2: (mid-semester)*

"Part of what I'm trying to figure out is, you know, the placement into this class, are there positive and negative effects going on that maybe you're not even aware of? ...Ultimately, I want you to benefit from this too."

Sometimes I might ask the participant if she remembered the idea of my study, rather just telling it to her and assuming she knew or cared.

*From Lynn 1:*

"I know I went over it when I talked to you class, but, Do you remember to point of... my study? Do you remember what I'm trying to look at?" to which she responded, "Um, Trying to see what makes kids be in Basic instead of... 101?"

**Third-space moments.** As I have said, I tried to establish my positionality as someone who was in some ways as insider to the institution, but at the same time, not *part* of the institution; that I was on the *participants'* side, not the school's or their teachers', and I felt this crucial to establishing a third-space and getting insights that might not come out in first-space conversations or interviews.  In the very beginning, as noted above, I hoped to set this tone by making sure the teacher left the room when I introduced myself to the class, in telling them *why* I needed her to leave the class, and in how I told them about my study.  Also, I tried to speak with each participant about class (mine and their) before we got started with the interviews, partly hoping to establish

some type of insider status as a fellow student, or at least someone with whom to commiserate over workloads and murky professorial expectations.  But as I indicated above, the degree to which any participant perceived me as an insider is something that needs to be shown in the data, not presupposed.

One can see in the nature of my vernacular some attempts to enter the third-space with my subjects. For example, my speech in Sam's interviews is particularly striking for its wordiness, choppiness, and incessant uses of the work "like." In reviewing the interview, I could hear myself morphing vernaculars somewhat, not intentionally, but I believe in order to get out of the institution-student binary. I heard this tendency in my interviews with most of the participants—a tendency to engage in a discourse that bespoke an equality of social standing.  It would be naïve and presumptuous to say that every time *I* felt we were in that third-space that my participant felt it as well. But, in my analysis of the conversations, I do believe that we (the participants and I) reached moments where they were open about feelings and experiences that, to me, indicated evidence of a third-space, off-script (Gutierrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995) dialogue.

Here are some brief examples of how this positionality emerged in the conversations as I attempt to remind a participant that I'm indeed not a representative of the school.

*From Sam 1:*

S: So, after I finish this class, I have to go to College Writing, so, basically I wasted—like, not wasted, but like—a semester I could have been… like you know I—

J: You can say "wasted"; I'm not part of the school... [Joking tone]

S: [laughs] So, I'm like behind.  So…

As I said, I aimed to make sure they felt that they were talking to someone who was not part of the school, but who might have some knowledge of the other side of the classroom. I was not trying to be an *insider,* since I am twice their age, and I thought such attempts might create even more distance and lack of trust. However, the truth was that I *was* a student at the same school, while in my other life, I was a composition teacher. I had no professional ties to UWA, but I had an insider stance within the educational system more broadly speaking. I tried to use this to both understand some student issues they might be going through—writing papers, trying to figure out what a certain teacher wants, etc.—but also show that I could give them some perspective from the other side (from behind the curtain).

***From Kelly and Ashley 2:***

K: Only like one person talks [in our class].

J: Yeah... Do they talk too much?

K and A: (knowingly together) yeah... [laughs]

J: I've had those classes [laughs]... As a teacher, you know, there's nothing you can do!

[all three chuckle]

I call this exchange a third-space moment—or maybe more precisely a moment where I attempt to bring them into a third-space—because even though I position myself as an English teacher, it is not as *their* English teacher; I am in English teacher in another life, for other people, and I can talk to them from if behind the curtain.  Again, this is my attempt.

***From Lynn 1:*** We had been discussing the image of an institution with a giant red pen versus the individual trying to express herself.  I ask Lynn what the institution was saying.

> L: Can't do it. You're meaning doesn't *mean* anything. What do *you* have to say that we do not know?

> J: And what's your *real* response to that?

> L: [immediately] Whatever I have to *say* is meaningful.

My qualifier "real" is key here, because I think it signified to Lynn that I was not interested in scripted answers, that we were just talking, and that I wanted to know what *Lynn*, not participant-qua-student, thought.

***From Twist 2c:*** I had noticed that, in comparison with the stories he had told me, Twist was choosing very shallow topics for his papers, especially the narratives about his life.

> J: I feel like there's a part of you where you do not want—you're protecting yourself in the class. You do not *want* to put yourself out there in these papers.
> T: And that's what it is... I got... "Easy, Behind English," and it's like, Why even try?

**Pushing the participant beyond surface impressions, where appropriate.** This topic is where I differ from Van Manen (1990) and the more Husserlian school of phenomenology. Without pushing in on this topic with Twist, I do not think we could have reached a deeper connection between his bland paper topics and how he felt about his English class—how being in that class made him feel about himself, and the type of (non)effort it inspired, and more.  Here are some more instances where my pushing

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participants beyond their initial thoughts may have led to valuable insight/information.

**From Dawn:**

J: Placement testing can have emotional impacts on people in a lotta ways, you know?

D: Yeah, it does, but / it did not impact me that way, it just / Well yeah it *did*! It made me feel like I was stupid and a little kid again. And I'm not a little kid; I'm a full grown adult. So / it *offended* me.

Dawn had been wavering between acceptance of and resentment toward her BW placement. I wanted to push her on the emotions that the placement seemed to bring up, and so rather than directly telling her this, I mentioned how a lot of people do feel that way. I think this led to her re-thinking her position on the placement somewhat, allowing her to feel her emotions, not deny them.

The following examples might help illustrate the differences between what I have called *pushing* as opposed to what some interviewing literature (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 2005) call *responding*.

**From Kelly Ashley part 2:**

J: Okay, so you weren't surprised [about their BW placement], But how does that mean you *feel* about it thought? Do you feel like, This is gonna be *good* for me? It'll help me do better in 101? or like. . .

I would call this *responsive* interviewing in that I am following up what what they have told me, and trying to get them to clarify and to go father. But the following would be more what I call *pushing*.

**From Kelly 3:** She had gotten back her second graded paper, a B- (80 points), which was a slight improvement over her last paper, a C (79 points).

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J: How do you feel about the B-?

K: I'm fine with it.

But it does not *sound* like she is fine with it.

J: Yeah?. . . / A lot of people might be disappointed with a B-; you're not

disappointed?

K: Mmm mmm [much more sure this time].

J: I mean, I'm not saying you should be [disappointed].  When I was a teacher,

[students would complain about B-'s]. . . You sound a little frustrated that it's only

been a one-point improvement.

K: No.  Not really.

Now, just looking at the interview transcript so far, it may seem that I almost *want*

her to be less okay with the B-; but the fact is that there were elements in her tone and her

body language that just were not sitting right.  I attempt here to use some of my hybrid

positionality—both a student here at UWA, but English teacher in another life—in order

to get more dialogue going. Later on, her frustration was revealed:

Kelly says, in a very frustrated tone,

K: [annoyed] It's just a *class*.  All we do is *write*. We're not learning anything.  All

we're doing is *writing*.

I heard her saying that they're just writing, not learning to get better, so I suggest that a lot

of people would say that just writing *is* getting better at writing... to which she slammed

back:

K: I got better ONE point.

[Silence]

So after all, not only is she indeed upset with the B-, she has taken it as evidence that the class is doing nothing for her, that writing more is *not* a way to learn to write *better,* and she has hidden all this beneath her initial acceptance of the grade, justified by statements like, "that's just what I get." What she might have said on a survey or structured interview—or even an interview that attempted to keep the researcher out of the picture, not let him or her push beyond the surface—could belie her frustration, not just with the paper or the grade but with the whole class; and not just with the class but with the whole notion within composition studies that as you write more you are learning more.

**Data Analysis**

> CDA [Critical Discourse Analysis] is a form of critical social science geared to a better understanding of the nature and sources of social wrongs, the obstacles to addressing them and possible ways of overcoming those obstacles. (Fairclough, 2009, p. 167).

I mentioned above that the critical nature of this study is not only part of the interviewing/data collection, but a fundamental orientation of the data analysis as well. What follows is a brief description of some seminal authors' perspectives on what defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), that is the natural underlying analytical framework for this study. Since the data is discursive in nature—that is, since my investigation consists of open conversations with my participants about their views on, and experiences of their placement—that information itself now must be analyzed from a critical perspective if we are to maintain the concern for underlying issues of power, privilege, reproduction of marginalized social identities, and the like.

Furthermore, CDA is an approach that allows the researcher to look at her own role in the interviews—a key component to establishing and evaluating the third-space positionality I was aiming for.

CDA is not a prescribed method or a specific theory (Blomhart and Blucean, 2000; Fairclough, 2009; Gee, 1999; Jager & Maier, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) but similar to phenomenology and even critical theory, it is a shared set of orientations "characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through systematic and *retroductable* investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual)" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3, italics original), whose "scholars are typically interested in the way discourse (re)produces social *domination*, that is, the *power abuse* of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively *resist* such abuse" (van Dijk, 2009, p. 63, italics original). Wodak and Meyer (2009) further state, "the use of language could lead to a mystification of social events which systematic analysis could elucidate. . . Hence, 'critique' is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things. . . [S]uch theories seek not only to describe and explain but also to root out a particular kind of delusion" (p. 7). So clearly, the major underlying concerns of my study match up directly with those that broadly define CDA.

Now, while there is no one method or theory that *is* CDA, "[t]hree concepts figure indispensably in all variants of CDA: critique, power, and ideology (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 87).  Reisigl and Wodak (2009) go on to more specifically define *ideology* in a way that makes even more clear the connection between their statements about CDA and the concerns of the present study.  They describe ideology as "an (often) one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations,

convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific

social group" (p. 88). Further, and perhaps even more to the point, they claim,

> Ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal
>
> power relations through discourse: for example, by establishing hegemonic
>
> identity narratives [e.g., "I am a bad writer,"—JL], or by controlling the access to
>
> specific discourses or public spheres ('gate-keeping'). (p. 88).

To be sure, the central topic of this dissertation—educational placement decisions—

serves as a gate-keeping mechanism, even if unintentionally.

In terms of what research topics might be best suited to CDA, Wodak and Meyer

(2009) say that what interests CDA is "the more hidden and latent type of everyday

beliefs, which often appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies, thus

attracting linguists' attention" (p. 8). And later they claim, "CDA can be defined as being

fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural

relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language

(p. 10), "areas," Znedek and Johnstone (2008) add, "where power and ideology are likely

to circulate discursively (albeit not always visibly)" (p. 28). So, given the critical nature

of this study, and given that the data analyzed will be highly discursive—since the

interviewing approach was so conversational and unstructured—some form of CDA had

to guide my data analysis.

## Chapter Three Summary

If "CVI seeks to understand how power is exerted by the test design, test

conditions, and decisions made based on the test scores, and how this power affects the

particular groups and individuals assessed" (Perry 2008, p. 152), then my study and

framework should present a working model of CVI. In the next two chapters I present my

findings and analyses based on my conversations with participants about their BW

placement and course.  In Chapter Four, I will focus more on the personal consequences

lived through by each participant, and where relevant, I will attempt to draw conclusions

about the validity and improvement of the particular placement program at UWA, where

my study took place. In Chapter Five, I will attempt to broaden my analysis and focus

more on the societal consequences that seemed to emerge from my interviews. In this

chapter, my statements and arguments will regard college composition placement more

generally, applying less to UWA itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES OF BASIC WRITING PLACEMENT

A major issue I wanted to investigate when I began this study was the difference

between being a student in Basic Writing versus *being* a Basic Writ*er*. As Gee (1989,

1990, 1999, 2003, 2004) reminds us, education is inseparably tied to social identity (in

fact for Gee, learning and education in their truest sense are more about assuming the

social role of physicist, linguist, historian, etc., than internalizing curricular content). I

wondered if the decision to place a student in Basic Writing (BW) was likely to have the

effect of making him feel like—and believe himself to be—a basic writer; and if so, if the

costs associated with that type of social identity might outweigh the benefits the

placement program hoped he would receive during a semester of BW. As Messick

(1989b) said in his seminal chapter on validity, "tests used for planning student

experiences ought to promise greater benefit to the student if the plan is carried out than

if alternative plans are followed" (p. 67). My investigation began with the idea that these

matters of stigmatized social identities might not only hurt the chances that certain

students' BW placement promised a greater benefit than a College Writing (CW)

placement, but also that such data would all too likely evade the most typical methods of

data collection for validity inquiries (see Chapter Two).

In this chapter, I report my findings based on conversations with eight BW

students: Ashley, Dawn, John, Kelly, Lynn, Renee, Sam, and Twist (all pseudonyms).

During these conversations, I tried to gain insight into how the BW placement and the

ensuing course were affecting these students' notions of themselves as writers and

students (and student-writers, and college students). I was curious about a campus stigma

(at UWA) about BW students; about the impact of an individual viewing herself as one of *those* students, and whether this was a new identity (in contrast to previous schooling) or a long-standing one (enforced by years of being placed in that lower achieving group), similar to what Reisigl and Wodak (2009) called "hegemonic identity narratives" (p. 88). In the first section of this chapter, I organize my initial findings around these interlocking themes, which I will call *inscription, re-inscription*, or *interruption* of previously held notions of self-as-writer, and self-as-student. In other words, I found that for some participants, this placement decision seemed to stamp an identity on them (inscription); for some it seemed to play into long-standing notions of self-as-writer (or student) from previous schooling (re-inscription); and for some, the decision ran counter to such long-standing notions (interruption). I chose the word *inscription* particularly because of its root word *script*, an important concept in Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) notion of third-space (see Chapter Three). I will present some participant who I think fall into each of these categories; and I will leave off with a pair who represent a *possible* re-inscription, though this is nothing they will admit to.

After this discussion, I  present an evaluation of certain participants' placement, based on these and other qualitative data, in order to show how this evidence can be crucial in assessing the appropriateness and profitability (hence, validity) of BW placement. Finally, I present some concrete issues that surfaced in some interviews, issues of which UWA's placement program should be made aware in terms of its ongoing validation and improvement.

**Impact of Placement and Course on Student/Writer Identity**

**Preliminary Remark**

While I have emphasized the term *phenomenological* as a major part of my framework, I note here that I found the most rhetorically effective representation of my data was not the one that followed most traditional phenomenological studies. In what follows, I present the stories of my participants around the themes that emerged, as opposed to the ongoing personal narrative of each. I concede the argument that such presentation of data strays from the usual phenomenological approach; however, as I said, I consider the choices I have made here to be matters of rhetorical effectiveness in terms of how best to represent the data, which I could not have found through a non-phenomenological framework.

**Inscription: Dawn and Renee**

**Dawn.** I begin with Dawn because of her extreme reaction to her BW placement. Dawn is not likely to represent a typical incoming student: she was in her mid-40s, had three children (19, 7, and 4), and had been working in a local bank for many years. Her bank had recently been bought out by a national bank, and at the time of the study, her hours were being continually cut, in part because of (as she reports) her non-standard grammar and dialect and their declining appropriateness for the newer, broader audience of her bank's emails, memos, and other communications. Yet, while Dawn's circumstances may be less than typical, her reaction to the placement was so strong that I think she articulates what can happen—at least on some level—to a person's notion of herself as a student and writer when she is placed in BW by the school.

Dawn was quite torn about her placement. While she believed that BW was the

right class for her (though, she clearly envisioned it as a skills-based course that would help her catch up on fundamentals), she greatly resented being placed into it, and she had a bad experience with the placement test itself, during which she reports being the only student in the room and being proctored by a young woman not much older than her son. When I first asked her how she felt about her placement, she said:

> Dawn: I'm a non-traditional student, by far.  And coming from a working to a non-working situation? – I work with documents, spread sheets, memos, you know, conferences... And going back to Basic English? /[1] I feel kinda STUpid? But / there's things in the class that I need, that I weren't aware of [she mentions structure of sentences, grammar, introductions, conclusions]....

Dawn even took her placement as a remark on her self as a professional as well:

> D: I feel like I / did not pay enough attention / to what I was doin' at work, and / I feel uneducated now! I actually feel *stupid!* That sounds, it doesn't, plain and simple it makes me look like I did not do my job.

I asked her if she believed that others had been viewing her (via her writing) this way, to which she said,

> D: I do not know, I—Yeah! I think so.  Prolly the people that took over [the people from the national bank], that were comin' in?

Dawn seemed to think that this placement revealed a certain reality about herself, her education, and the way her language must make her sound to others (and now to herself).

Yet, perhaps in part because of this new view of herself as a professional/writer, she clearly felt that she needed the lower level course:

> D: Yeah, but I think goin' back through and takin' the basic English? And / starting

---

[1]    I use slashes [/] to indicate a pause that is longer than what would be indicated by an ellipsis [...]

from the ground—the back up—it's it a while since I've been in, like, college?  I

think that it would be … / benefit me more than... / I'm missin' out on things?

At this point, I asked her where she would have placed herself, if given the choice, and

the follow dialogue ensued:

D: I probably woulda took the bottom and worked my way up, cuz I do not think

the uh / starting at like *300* level, when I have a / 100 level / requirement / I do not

think that'd be a smart idea.

Josh: And yet, / when I first asked you about the placement decision, it sounded

like someone deciding *for* you...

D: Yeah, that's what it kinda felt like.

J: Felt like what?

D: I felt like I was going back to high school—like to *grade* school.

I think the conflict Dawn expresses can help portray the impact of the decision (made by

others on her behalf) itself, since she does seem to think she needs the course.

As I mentioned, the testing itself was difficult for Dawn. She resented being read

instructions and proctored by a college student. She felt as if she was not being trusted to

take the exam on her own, that by giving her this proctor, the school was suggesting she

might cheat.

J: The setting itself offended you.

D: That offended me, and just the thought that they think my mentality is, like /

like I'm *im*mature? *In*responsible? You know what I mean?

J: So before you even take the test you're feeling kind of insulted, kind of

belittled...

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D: Oh yeah, definitely.

But I wanted to get back to the issue of the placement and the impact of the decision, not the testing:

J: But then the *placement* into 100 rather than 101? How did that feel?

D: Well, I thought, Okay I need to do this, like it's the requirements, cuz its part of this thingy. Then I thought, I do not *need this*! Then I thought, once I read over things, I thought, You know what? I need this; I need a refresher; I need ta like get caught up on things so I can move through the other two real fast. . . . Which I said, *Okay*, well then you know, if this is a requirement, I gotta do it.

And then again, the other side of the coin emerged:

D: But still, coming from working and going back to here... I'm like, *I* already know this stuff! But then, you look at it and you really *do not* know it all...

Later, in another shift back to more of the resentment of her placement, Dawn said that she had not received the prompt ahead of time,

Which if they woulda gave'n [struggling] me it a week before and gave me time ta think, I wouldn't—*might* be in this, might be in *another* English. . . Yeah, it kinda felt / your worthlessness, that's what you felt; you felt like you weren't worth too much. That's what *I* felt.

So if she had received the prompt, she thinks she might have been in CW, which I read as a feeling of misplacement, since she is blaming her preparation, not her abilities. Now, the reasons why Dawn entered the testing unaware of the prompt were not entirely clear. Whether she actually did not receive it, however, is not what matters here; Dawn believed that the prompt was not available to her, and from a phenomenological

perspective, whether or not the program did all it could to get her the information, the fact remains that she did not receive it as intended.

To some extent, as I said, it seems as if Dawn's case is atypical, both because of her status as a returning student in her mid-40s, and because of what sounds like a highly unusual testing situation, where she was personally proctored by an undergraduate student. What seems less atypical (at least among my participants) is the shifting back and forth between feeling like she needs the course and being upset by being placed there. Further, her expectations of what the course might offer may be a poor match for the actual BW curriculum. She may get some of that "more polished education" she's looking for, but as someone who has been creating professional communications for a living, she may be farther ahead than is desirable in the types of writing skills and practices exercised in BW.

What may be a problem with Dawn, though, is this inscripted view of herself as *unpolished* which—she says—came at least in part from her placement and the testing experience, though it would be shortsighted to put all the blame on the BW placement, since there may have been any number of other things going on in her (professional) life that would be attacks on her self-esteem. (As one example, Dawn's job had recently been given over to a younger, college-educated woman who was hired by the national company, and whom Dawn herself had trained.) But the way that this placement made Dawn look back at herself as a professional with different eyes, believing that others must have thought she was stupid, uneducated, unpolished—this view is surely not what the placement program wants, so my hope is that Dawn's somewhat extreme reaction can

at least present possibilities of ways that student might resent or resist their placement decision.

Unfortunately, I never heard back from Dawn after this interview, so I do not know if the course itself was able to overcome these feelings. The larger issue here, though, is the fact that the placement into BW helped inscribe Dawn with a notion of herself (as uneducated, unprofessional) that the course would *have to* overcome in order to argue that this placement was more beneficial than an alternative course of action.

**Renee.** Renee, an 18 year old, white female had been home schooled her whole life and had grown up in a very religious family, though she no longer considered herself a believer. She was surprised by her BW placement, but not particularly upset about it. It seemed that her home-schooling left her with a feeling that she did not have any actual sense of her abilities as a writer, which put her in a unique position to be susceptible to the potential inscripting power of BW placement:

> R: I'm home schooled, so like I never actually got… like I always got B's. A's or B's, but like my mom graded my papers, so… like you never really got the official, like what-does-everyone- else-think-about-it.

Here was Renee's reply when I asked how she felt about her BW placement:

> R: I think / it was not / totally correct. But / now that I'm actually in the class, I like it.... Just because I really like the teacher. It's an easy class; I do not really have to do much work for it. But / I would've rather not, because I have to pay more money . . . and I really do not have that money, so...

I will note now that Renee did not return to UWA in the spring for financial reasons. After

we talked some more, I wanted to get back to this notion of, as Kelly will later put it,

"where I was supposed to be."

J: So at first you were thinking, you used the word "correct."

R: Yeah.  Well… when I first… I took the essay, you know? And I was—I hadn't

gotten any sleep that night befooore?  And I was  really tired and I didn't really—

like I tried, but I didn't really go back and, like, do anything; I just wrote the

whole thing down first draft and I just gave it in, cuz it's like, well, I've never had

a problem with it before…

J: So you kind of assumed you'd be—

R Yeah! I just assumed that it would pass.

J: Yeah.

R: And I think I took it a little for granted cuz then when I found out I didn't I was

like… [quick] What!? [laughs]

J: Did you talk to anybody before the class started?

R: About..?

J: I don't know... did you, I mean… were you upset enough to be like, "Hey, can I

take it again?" Like I…

R: Nnno… cuz I, like on my SATs I scored a 6, which is like… it's passing but it's

not good.  So I was like, welll... maybe, maybe I AM a bad writer… like, Maybe I

am.  So…. I don't know –

At the end, Renee expresses the notion that this placement was somehow the answer to

the question of whether or not she can write. She clearly trusts institutionalized

assessments as containing the real answer to this question—an answer she values more

than the grades she received from her mother throughout her home schooling. This view makes some sense because she really only has the judgment of one person (who is also her mother), and she feels that there is a more official "what does everybody else think" that is the true answer of whether or not she is a "bad writer." But surely, this message was not indented by the placement program.

As we spoke more, I tried to dig deeper into this notion of placement-as-message:

J: Another effect, you said is—and maybe we can talk more about this—you kind of come in saying to yourself, at least as a student—I'm not really a numbers person; I'm more of like a language person… then you get these TEST results… and it's like…

R: Yeah.

J: So who's right? Are YOU right?

R: [Laughs.]

J: You know yourself… for 18 years. And you've had an hour with each of these—you know, who's right?

R: yeah. So that's—I don't know... I guess I'll find out.

J: Well, how do you think we fi—how do you find out if if you're, I mean this is kind of silly, but if you're a numbers person or a language person?

R: Well, I have taken some tests, so I know that I'm more… I don't do well in math… Like I really, I really hate math.

J: Yeah.

R: Like I… I like English, I like common sense; like, that is interesting to me. But… I guess if I do WELL in the class, if I get good grades, I if I know how to

*write*, then… that will… at least… it will sort of… solidify that I'm actually… am

good at this.

Later, another manifestation of this line of thinking arose when I asked her where she felt

she belonged in terms of her writing amidst the other students in the class:

R: Right now, like. . . I do not really like to think of what *my* opinion is; I like to

go with hers [the teacher]? Right now I'm like right, like second highest grade? So

I sort of see myself as above the 50 percent, but / not / quite there yet.

Renee seems to be looking for outside forces to answer the question of who she is

as a student, as a writer, and I doubt she is unusual in this pursuit. In Chapter Five, I will

take a more critical look at this theme, viewing Renee herself more as an example of

what can and does happen on a broader social level; but for the purposes of this chapter,

it seems worth noting that this tendency to give the institution the final say about a

student's abilities and student identity (what I am calling *inscription*) is out there—and I

do not think there are simple answers. There is the school of thought that says this is

exactly why DSP should be used, because then it is the student herself, not the institution,

providing these 'answers' (e.g., Elbow, 2003); yet more critical analyses of DSP (Perry,

2008; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999) argue—and I agree—that the larger forces of the

institution are still determining these answers for the student, that giving her the choice of

composition class is not alone enough to counter the power of a lifetime of

institutionalized assessments—from classroom grades to large-scale testing—that

reinforce the notion that it is *others* who have the say as to who we are, what we are good

at, where we belong.

Renee had to leave UWA for financial reasons, as I said, so she never got to take

CW, and it will not be possible to see how this notion of "Maybe I AM a bad writer" will play out in her schooling and her life. She seemed to do fine in BW, though; but she thought it was an easy class, and she said that it was only challenging in that it was hard to figure out what the teacher wanted the papers to be about. I do wonder, though, with someone like Renee, if a CW placement might have had her thinking, "Maybe I am a GOOD writer," and what impact that might have had on her education, both in that class and beyond.

**Re-inscription: Lynn's Polarized Literate Identity**

Lynn, an 18 year old, white female from Pittsburgh, with a fairly thick regional dialect, is particularly interesting because of the complex role(s) that writing played in her life. She at once claims "I'm terrified of writing, I swear," and yet considered herself to *be* a writer—of poems, stories, journal entries, and more. In fact writing is so important to her, that ever since she was a kid, she had planned to leave her diary to someone in her will. This fact is why I call her literate identity polarized: her personal writing (and her identity as a writer) is perhaps the most important thing in her life; but when it comes to school writing, she is not only traditionally low-achieving—she is terrified.

> When I first asked her about the BW placement, she said,
>
> Lynn: For the past / billion years I've been alive, I always had a problem writing essays. Always. did not matter what it was... I can write stories and poems from scratch... I just can't put words and sentences and grammar and all that BORING stuff in context.

She also told me:

> L: I was in AP English in high school for two years, and I figured it would help

me, but apparently it was not that effective.

J: Help you do, do what?

L: Like / write essays better. Manage my time with writing and / push me further.

I asked her if she felt that the class was helping at the time, trying to see if her impression that it was ineffective came as a result of her BW placement.

L: Um, I felt like it was—I learned a LOT from it? But, I mean, I thought I was

doing better, but app—but I thought my teacher was a Nazi, so...

Listening to the recording, it seems clear that Lynn was about to say, "I thought I was doing better, but apparently not" before interrupting herself.

This placement decision seemed to re-inscribe Lynn's notion of herself as a bad (school) writer, someone who thought she was doing better, but apparently not—even though she had been in AP English. Lynn said she knew how to write creatively, but not *proper essays*. I asked her what she meant by that.

J: What would a proper essay / entail?

L: Well / one where you do not get back like five million red lines. [chuckles]

In school writing, then, an essay's merit is entirely determined by the teacher, not the writer. If you do not get five million red lines, it was proper; if you do, it was not proper. Lynn continued:

L: I'm terrified of writing. I swear I . . . [laughing] Um, I think the perfect essay is

clear, concise, like / I'm able to put my thoughts out without / re-guessing what –

having the reader understand what I wanna say.

J: Have you been able to do that?

L: In my creative writing, yes [laughs].

J: Why do you think that is?

L: I do not know, I think it's more like, I'm afraid to mess up, so I / js—stay back more? Instead of like, this is how I feel; I'm gonna write it the way I wanna write it.

J: That's a really good insight.  Do think that's common? That people are so afraid to mess up, they do not write well?

L: They're afraid of the red ink, yes.

We laugh.

J: It sounds like you do writing outside of school?

L: Yeah, I've written ever since I could write, haha.

I reflect to her that I hear the split between her two notions of writing:

J: There's you and your literacy, then there's this institution with its red pen, telling you, "No, you're not literate."

L: It's really harsh because—I know I can't spell to save my life, and grammar and me do not get along. Comma, the—yeah, that's not important. What I care about more about literacy, reading and writing is because the understanding of it. People write because they have a reason to write; they want to express what they want to express.

She says all of this in a confident, instructive tone. These are her insights, not simply what she has been told. This is when she tells me,

L: When I was little, I always expected, like / I wanna put in my will is to read my diary. . . I wanna put my diary in my will.

Lynn also spoke of the play identities she and her friends would take on as children—she

was the book writer; Mike was the player, etc., and she adds, "A *lot* of it's still true.  It's very scary [laughs]."

Lynn clearly values literacy, but at the same time, she does not see a real connection between her personal literacy and what is expected in school.  This disconnect allows her to believe that all value judgments about the quality of her personal writing lie within *her* (which will potentially limit her growth in that arena, since she has a reason to believe that any and all critique must be wrong) and that all value judgments about the quality of her *proper* writing lie in the hands of others (which will clearly hinder her ability to take ownership over those processes). Her BW placement seemed to reinforce this polarity, which in turn served as a re-inscription that, as she put it, " For the past / billion years I've been alive, that I always had a problem writing essays."

I return to Lynn shortly in order to show how the BW course itself was indeed able to help her not only overcome the re-inscribed identity of bad-school-writer, but also helped merge her polarized identities of writer and bad-school-writer—a true success story, based on these crucial, qualitative measures.

**Interruption: Sam and Twist**

Sam was an 18 year-old white female from Pittsburgh, a first generation college student, but someone who had always received praise for her academic achievement. Sam came into college, and into her placement testing, with tremendous confidence in her student abilities. Her BW placement, therefore, served as an interruption of a long-standing identity as a good student and writer. At the beginning of our first interview Sam told me,

> Sam: I took, like, college classes in high school, like, all my writing, like I… do
> really good in writing. So I was—it's a big shock to me when, like, I was in that

> class… and I asked my teacher why, like, why I was in it, and she was like, well, based on that one paper, you were put into the class.
>
> J: So you didn't submit a portfolio, you took the test?
>
> S: Yeah, cause I didn't think that—like cause I also applied to like community college, and I did the same thing, and I was… um… *exempt* from writing.

She continued,

> S: I've been, like, way above that since, like, elementary school... So, like, going back down? Like downgrading? It was like, Whoa, like, what did I do wrong?. . I haven't been there since like, first grade. So it was like, wow, like when I first got my results, it was like, Are you serious?

Later I will address Sam's tendency to reify notions of correct and incorrect placement in more detail. For now though, I present her view that learning to write happens in a course-by-course fashion, so that if you have already passed a certain writing course in a certain school, it would be incorrect to place you in a similar course at another school. This notion clearly affected her understanding of her BW placement:

> S: Yeah, I was in a college writing class like my senior year. So. And that was like the [??] class to take at our high school. There's no like… I did really good in the class. I got an A, like 95% or something. I wrote all kinds of papers.

Sam learned about the BW portfolio option, which could get her exempt from CW. She knew that if she received an A in the course, and submitted a portfolio of her work, the WPA would read it and possibly decide to place Sam out of CW. Sam used this as motivation to work hard during the course. She did say, though, that without this option, she would not have put effort into her papers:

S: I know if that [exemption from CW] was not an option, I would just / write whatever, and / not care as much.

It seemed that because of this last placement option, Sam allowed her more long-standing notion of herself as a strong writer/student to take precedent over this interruption. But at the same time, Sam had a lot riding on this option, as can be seen from the ways she talked about the class itself:

S: Well the class it's not—it's really helpful [reassuring tone]. It's gonna help my writing? But, like um, I feel like I did most of this stuff with my writing before? I mean, it just like gives me a refresher. It's a, like a good class for people that, I think, that need it, I think it's a really good class.

She later said,

S: I just feel that like the kids who need to be there, who should be there, it's gonna help them—It's gonna help me too. But like the kids that need it, it's gonna really help them…

And then you can tell the people that are like… slower, that are in the class.

These last two statements were among several that showed her tendency to *Other* (Kubota, 2001; Palfreyman, 2005) at least certain people in the class. It might also reflect Sam's feeling that she really was not a part of the class, which seemed evidence in statements like, "They do like a freewrite every day," which I note because she used the word *they*, not *we*. Perhaps Sam saw herself as already not part of the class, since she was determined to submit her portfolio.

Sam also said,

S: Well I think like I do like feel stu—like / stupid every time I go in the class

'cause it IS a basic writing class, and like no one hears of English 100. . . Like, my

friends who do not have to take it are like, What is it?  . . . So I'm like awwwwww,

It's *before* 101; it's *Stupid* English.

J: Is that what you call it?

S: Yeah [laughs]

In the end, Sam did place out of CW. She was *very* relieved. I do believe that she let her

long-standing identity as a good student writer help drive her to overcome this placement,

which she felt to be an error. It may be worth considering, though, what was at stake for

her, resting on the judgment of those who read her portfolio. If they had decided not to

grant her exemption from CW, the impact on Sam might have been very hard to

overcome—for she would have more confirmation that she was indeed one of *them*. As it

turned out, she was saved from being cast in this role; but my concern is about how much

the ultimate say about her as a writer (based in part upon her reification of this concept)

continues to be based upon the judgment of others.

The next participant demonstrates the danger of this interruption when the long-standing

good-student identity is not as solid (or perhaps as well founded) as Sam's.

**Twist.** Twist was an 18 year old, African-American male from inner-city

Philadelphia, a highly prolific writer of poetry, drama, music, and raps.  He was very

resistant to BW placement, and outspoken about it from the first time we met. I noticed

Twist when I first spoke to his class about my study because as I was just beginning to

describe it, he raised his hand—no one had asked a single question in any of my pitches

to BW classes. When I asked if he had a question, he say no; but he had a statement.  He

said he thought this whole placement things was, "BS,  Fer-real, fer-real.  I had AP

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English in high school..."  I told him that these were among the kind of feelings I wanted

to investigate, so I hoped he would sign up for the study.

Our first interview began as we walked to one of the benches in the UWA quad. I

asked him to continue his story as we sat down:

Josh: So you were getting bored with English?

Twist: Yeah, uh… it was like you told you the other day, I had AP English for my

last two years of high school, and, I mean, learning that stuff it was… complex

and challengin' stuff, and then to just die down to basic writing English. It's not…

it's not fulfilling what I'm looking for.

J: What are you looking for?

T: Something I can actually learn from. Not something I already know, a couple

years back.

J: You use the word "challenge."  I like that.

T: Yeah. For me, challenging is it makes you wanna work to something, whereas

the work I'm getting' now in Basic Writin'? It's like, Do this… and I'mmon

explain it… and then… I don't really know.  It be too easy to write it.  It's like

okay, I can go to sleep and do this in like fifteen minutes.

J: Yeah. You like the challenge.

T: Yes I do. Yes I do.

Twist and Sam seemed to share the notion that learning to write is a matter of

learning certain things, then moving on to other things; that if one is placed too low, he

will be in a class where the students are learning things that he already knows, rather than

being in a class where he can practice and gain greater fluency in his abilities. This view

may not be uncommon—several of my participants share it—but it seems worth noting because a strong adherence to it may serve to undercut everything that a thoughtful placement program is trying to do. In other words, if a student like Twist sees valid writing placement as a reflection of what courses he has already taken and passed, not as a matter of thoughtful, professional, localize and contextualized judgment—made in his best interest—then he might resent and resist the course, thinking it to be the wrong place (or himself to be the wrong person for that place), instead of developing the thinking and writing abilities the placement program determined he would need for his education at the college.

I asked Twist to tell me about finding out that he was placed in BW.

K: I got my report back it said I got English 100, and I'm like, what? Why I got English 100?

J: Well tell me about that, well, take me there.

T: It, it, it kinda hurt my feelings, fer-real fer-real. I really did.

J: I bet.

T: It really did 'cause I'm like, aw man… first… what, what do I… I felt… like I really let my SELF down, then I felt as though the school let ME down—'cause they never told me I could submit a portfolio. I never got a letter that said submit a portfolio—... I'm like, I'm thinking like this sh—this is wrong. It's switch, it should be switched [laughs].

As I said in regard to Dawn, the issue of whether Twist received the information about placement is less relevant than the fact that he did not believe himself to have received the message from the program. His experience was that of someone who did not receive

the intended messages from the program.

**Twist's identity as a writer.** Along with Lynn, Twist had a strong identification with his notion of himself as a writer—primarily of poetry and raps, which he would stay up till all hours of the night composing. Unlike Lynn, Twist believed that his school writing was at least somewhat on par with his personal writing, and he showed me his AP English final portfolio (which earned a 100%) as evidence. In the following passage, Twist reveals a conscious attempt to hide his writer-identity from his BW coursework:

> T: I bring off that / smart guy talk, and / I did not use any smart words in my paper at *all* because I literally—I do feel dumb in 100. Every time I go in that class I be *bored*, and I feel hurt that I really have 100. So I did not use *no* big words whatsoever; I kept everything *plain.*
>
> J: Why?
>
> T: Cuz it's, it's like / I do not know. I guess, cuz I do not feel like it's gonna do somethin'.
>
> J: If you were in 101, do you think you'd be going for bi—
>
> T: I wou—I would, I would be kickin' some *butt* with the words! I would, I would kickin' some serious *ass*. I do not know, it's just like / The whole time I was typin', I was like, I'm about to put 'optimistic'... No, I'ma just put 'obvious' because, like, who really cares? Then I was like, I was gonna put 'contagious'. No, I'm just gonna put, "people get sick / because, because it spreaded." Because, I mean, I do not know, it's just like, the thought that bein' in 100—it's like, Mmmm [grunt], it wrecks my brain to the point where I *do not wanna work*, but

then again, I wanna get out this class so bad that I *am* gonna do my work no

matter what.

And later he said,

"I got Easy, Behind English, and it's like, Why even try?"

At other times, Twist revealed what I believe where *un*conscious attempts to keep

his personal identity as a writer safe from the type of interruption that he experienced

with his BW placement. During our second meeting, as we were just casually talking,

Twist told me about his next paper assignment in which the teacher told the class to

"write about a memory you have, of something in your past." His answer seemed

innocent enough when I asked him what he would write about:

K: Um, possibly about / something I really enjoyed—like my thirteenth birthday?

Or, my first time going to an amusement park.

But later I thought about it. Considering the life Twist had described to me, coming from

inner-city Philadelphia, losing both of his parents by the age of 13, being raised by aunts

and uncles or family friends, leaving for college with no friends of his own because he

chose to study before partying—I was struck by the dull nature of the topics he chose. I

now see it as a way of protecting himself, particularly his personal writing and writer-

identity, from the type of criticism it might receive in the class, and as a way of keeping

his *real* self out of the BW course, never allowing himself to truly be a part of the class—

a similar resistance that some of Sam's Othering comments showed.

Twist, however, unlike Sam, was not able to use this separation from the others in

the course to rise above and gain exemption from CW; he ended up failing his first paper

for plagiarism (though he believed it was not), and then seemed unable to even hand in

other work, which resulted in a grade of F, leading to another semester of BW (which started off better, but went awry as well).

We talked at length about plagiarism, and I think the reasons why he did not understand the problem with the paper he handed in stem from some of the issues I've been discussing. First, the paper was on 9/11, a topic he had written about in high school; and both the fact that this topic is somewhat impersonal for him and that it was a paper topic he had already used, suggest to me that he was keeping his truer self out of his coursework. To make matters worse, at one point he loaned me his high school AP English portfolio, which included the assessment rubric, filled out by his teacher. While it was obvious to me that his 9/11 paper had very little of his own writing and was mostly passages from online sources—some cited, some not—his teacher gave the paper a 100%. So it seemed little wonder that he would be confused if his BW teacher failed a similar paper for plagiarism. Clearly, there is the argument that this precisely why Twist should have been in BW—so he could learn these things that his other school had failed to teach him. However, I counter that, first, this notion may misconstrue UWA's BW course as consisting of basic skills preparation, and second, that this (that is, what plagiarism is and how not to do it) was clearly *not* what Twist learned in the course. According to him, his paper was handed back with an F for being plagiarized, and his reaction was anger and confusion—not realization.

Twist's story is endlessly complex because there just seemed no way he could win after his BW placement. His feelings of being hurt by that decision surfaced often in our talks, and even when he stated determination to put in his best effort and move onto CW, he just never seemed to be able to follow through. There is no way to know what would

have happened if he had been placed in CW, and it's entirely possible that he would have failed that as well, that his lack of effort was unrelated to his BW placement. But as Messick (1989b) said,

> concern with minimizing underpredictions, or the proportion of rejected individuals who would succeed if given the opportunity, is also an important social value in connection both with individual equity and with parity for minority and disadvantaged groups. (pp. 79-80).

So I argue that even if there is no way to know, it is important to investigate the matter. The only certainty seemed to be, by the end of the semester, that another BW course was would be among the worst things for him. But, then the question arises: How can you move someone who failed BW up to CW anyway?  What about other students who have to repeat BW, or others who worked hard to pass it and move up?  Is that fair to them? And, does it matter if it's fair to them, if it's clearly the best course of action for Twist?

As another complicating facet, the placement coordinator and I went to look for Twist's placement essay (I wanted to see if there was a way to place him into CW via a fresh reading of his original essay), and it was missing.  I know he took the test, because he described it to me in detail, but there is no way to know why a reader placed him in BW—and yet that decision, from what it seems, had a great impact on Twist's education and student/writer identity. One thing clearly refuted by Twist and his story is the notion that Elbow (2003) attributes to Ed White: "after all, the stakes [of composition placement] are not so high" (p. 20).

I return to Twist later, where I bring out other themes from his story. The focus here was on student/writer identity, and particularly the way that BW placement might

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serve as an interruption of a positive sense. The result may not always be bad, as Sam

showed, for she was able to overcome the interruption and even use it as a wedge to push

herself beyond the others in the class and to later place out of CW altogether, which may

serve to re-enhance her positive sense of self-as-writer (albeit it, still through a reified

notion of this self that is definable by the institution). Twist, however, represents the other

side of the spectrum, the trap that can ensue when resistance to this new identity as a

basic writer and protection of the older, more positive identity, leaves someone caught in

a situation where he has to feel as if he is lowering himself—accepting his lesser status,

as it were, and engaging in the BW coursework—in order to gain the now-necessary

credentials to enter into CW; because the only alternative would be failure, followed by

either the acceptance of an even lower status (a repeating BW student), or more and more

failure, lower and lower status acceptance.

**Possible Re-Inscription: Kelly and Ashley**

Not all of the participants in this study resisted their BW placement. Kelly (18

year old, white female) and Ashley (18 year old, white female) both surprised me in that

neither one said she had a problem with her placement; both said they were fine with it,

and neither really seemed to feel a need to talk about it further. In fact, our first interview

(which the three of us did together) is laced with uncomfortable silences because it

seemed as if we really had little to talk about; at times I quietly wondered why they had

even signed up for the study. Yet, I left the interview with thoughts about placement that

had never occurred to me before, thoughts that would turn out to be similar to the same

criticisms that both Perry (2008) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999) raise about DSP. For

example, I wondered if Kelly and Ashley were—as DSP literature suggests—accepting of

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their placement because of a clear insight into their *true* writing abilities (Elbow, 2003; Royer & Gilles, 1998); or if, conversely, they had both been subjected to series after series of assessments and placements that reinforced their senses of self as poor writers, their "hegemonic identity narratives" (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p. 88), so that they had no genuine access to the type of unfiltered view that DSP is premised upon (Perry, 2008). I call this section "Possible Re-Inscription" because, on some level, there is no way to know the difference between these scenarios—hyper-awareness of capabilities (Royer & Gilles, 1998) versus subscription to hegemonic identity narrative—and in fact the binary may be false, since the notion that one's sense of self develops separately from the forces around it is not a view to which this dissertation subscribes. However, there is certainly evidence in their interviews of the type of re-inscription that, disguised as an unfiltered and personal sense of self, does raise important questions about hegemony and the interpolation of long-standing inscribed social identities.

When I first asked Kelly and Ashley about their feelings regarding their placement, the following discussion ensued:

Ashley: Um, I kinda knew that I was gonna be in it cuz I'm really bad at writing? So I figured I would be in that class. So I was not that surprised.

Josh: Um, who told you you were bad at writing? [laughs]

A: I just know that I am. Like, I do not like to write, so I do not really put a lotta effort into it?

J: In my experience as a writing teacher, people always tell me they're bad at writing, and they're usually not. It's just that people have told them they were.

A: [quickly] No, no one's ever told me.  I just think that I am, cuz I do not, like,

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care; I just / I do not know...

As can be seen, I felt the need to push her some, to use my own experience as a composition instructor. I meant what I said to her: year after year, I had students come up to me, as if to admit the dark secret that they were bad writers.  And year after year, they were much more likely to be just where I thought they should be, right on par with everyone else. I grew to believe that these internalized feelings were interpolations of institutional voices—teachers, standardized test, etc.—and that if I stopped treating the students like bad writers, if I in fact balked at the very notion and showed them some belief in their abilities, that they might produce better school writing than they ever had. And I still believe this to be the case.  So when Ashley told me, "I'm really bad at writing," I felt the need to share this experience, to complicate this notion which to her seemed to be a natural fact of the universe (Stygall, 1994).

I then turned to Kelly with the same question:

J: What did you think when you got the placement decision?

K: I knew I was gonna be in English 100 [laughs].

J: You knew before hand? Why?

K: Cuz I suck at writing.

I asked her to tell me what that meant.

K: I just knew that I'd be in it because I've never been great at English or writing. I've *always* been in lower English; I've *always* gotten bad grades in English.

Then I said to both Kelly and Ashley:

J: Okay, so you weren't surprised, But how does that mean you *feel* about it though? Do you feel like, This is gonna be *good*  for me? It'll help me do better in

101? or like,  Is it all bullshit?

K: I think it's gonna help…

[Laughter at the pause.]

J: Can you tell me more?

K: Well if you can't really write… the way the *teacher* wants you to write in the

first place… Then going into a class that gonna help you do that is gonna help

you. / In the long run…

J: [to Ashley] What do *you* think?

A: I think it's gonna help too.  Maybe give me some more skills that I don't have

in writing.  And make me wanna—maybe it'll, like, make me *wanna* write…

better?  And put effort into it?

Has it done that yet?

Ashley told me that she had a paper due that Tuesday and had already written two pages,

so she guessed it was.

As the interview went on, I wanted to continue pushing their ideas of themselves

as bad writers.  My aim here was in part to show them, and in part to see for myself, if

these notions were more rooted in keen observation or in interpolated institutionalized

voices, the kind that would be reinforce by their BW placement.

J: I wanna get back into, you both said "I can't write" …

A: Um sometimes I just don't know what to write about.  And, like, when they say

to do, like five pages?  It's like, I don't know what to write five pages about. / Or,

like, if I do know what to write, it's not organized. I don't know how to organize

it.

J: [to Kelly] What about you?

K: [Jokey] Sentence structure, punctuation, it's a big mess.  Everything.

J: [to Ashley] What about your sentence structure?

A: Um, it's pretty good.

Ironically, out of all the participants I interviewed, Kelly's spoken English was by far the closest to highly grammatical school-English, which made it seem strange to me that she would have the issues she said she had in her writing. And in fact, when I read some of her work, I did not see what she described here; rather, I saw a very timid writer, barely willing to build a sentence out of two T-units—an author with none of the whit or sharp sarcasm of the person I interviewed throughout the year; Kelly, it seemed to me, was not in that writing.

Since both students were showing no sign of displeasure with their BW placement I asked whether they would have chosen this BW if they had been given the choice. Kelly immediately has an answer:

K: [interrupts] No, if / I had the choice to make the decision? I would've been in English 100.

J: Really?

K: Really.  I went back home and I joked around about it.  I went, "YAY.  [dry] I'm in English 100" [laughs].

J: [to Ashley] What about you, if you had your choice?

A: Um, I'd prolly wanna be in 101.  Just cuz it's like, not have to take another English class this year.

J: [to Kelly] You do not mind having to take two classes?

K: no.

J: [Teasing] But it's *English!*

K: I had to take four years of it in high school.  What's two more? And usually you have to take it for a full year, and I'll only have to take it for one year; so it's not like it's even harming that much.

**Later interviews with Kelly.** Kelly and I spoke more in October, right after she had received her first paper grade. It was a C.  At this point, I expected to hear some of that resistance that was absent from our first interview.  Yet when I asked her feelings on the matter, she replied,

K: I'm happy with C's.

She clarified that this was the case in any class other than math or science.

J: Are you *aiming* for a C, when you're writing?

K: No.

J: What are you aiming for?

K: [annoyed] Nothing.... / I'm just *writing*.

She later told me,

K: Math and science is easier to write cuz they actually tell you what to write [laughs]; you do not have to put that much input into it.

J: And you'd rather not put your own input into it?

K: Um... sometimes.

I believed that I was indeed stumbling onto some of that resistance to the institution's voice that I had suspected was there, somewhere. I now read this last section as her way of saying to the institution, "Fine, if you're going to keep telling me that my

input is wrong, I'm just going to keep it to myself; just tell me what to say, and I'll say it."
This notion of protecting one's self via refusal to take risks in writing—in topic choice, in boldness of claims made, even in word choice and sentence construction—seems reminiscent of Twist and the way he guarded his writer-identity from the institution via his BW course; and Lynn showed a lot of the same sentiment.

I returned to the notion of Kelly being happy with C's. I will let this scene play out with no commentary.

J: I'm still curious about—I think there's something underneath the surface of the writing, the C, the "Whatever, I do not care," the "I do not look at the comments," I think there's something there.  But, maybe there isn't.

K: There isn't. / I got a D on my senior paper. And that was / like, 80% of my final grade.  [Silence.]

J: … You're not interested in doing better then.

K: I'm interested in doing "better," but... / I'm *interested* in doing better, it's just... / If I can't do any better, I can't do any better.

J: Who's to decide if you can't do any better?

K: [chuckles, as if "obviously"] If I can't get a higher grade, then I can't get a higher graded. / I've been getting Cs on my papers, prolly since middle school?

J: Right.

[Silence.]

J: So that's what I'm wondering about.  What...? / Is? … / To what extent is *that* / causing you to keep getting Cs, versus … I think you have this impression that you're, like, a C writer.  Which I do not believe in? Cuz I think if, you know, if

you *felt* like writing better, if you wanted to, you prolly could.  Like, you'd read

your comments and try to—But, I feel like / look, I do not know you very well,

but I think that a lot of people might be like, "Look, I've been told I was a C writer

for so long that / I'm just a C writer.  And that's what I do."

K: No, I was never told I was a C writer...

J: But you get Cs on your papers.

K: [annoyed] That's just what I *get*.  I've had help with writing. . . I was in special

reading in my elementary and junior high, which was pretty much a reading and

writing class, so I was *in* that for a few years, so just going off that I know I'm not

that great of a writer [chuckles].

[Silence.]

I still cannot say that the feelings and thoughts behind these statements mean that

her placement was less valid because it was predicated upon an interpolated social

identity rather than a pure assessment of the match up between her abilities and potential

(as if this were possible to measure) and the UWA composition curriculum; but I do argue

that her BW placement served to help reinforce some of these notions, which I suggest

Kelly will need to outgrow if she is to aspire to achieve what a liberal arts education has

to offer. The bigger question here is whether BW could turn out to be the less profitable

course of action because the class itself cannot make up for an interpolated social identity

that the placement helped re-inscribe; and if that means that a BW placement would not

be as valid as a CW placement.

In our third meeting, Kelly still said, "I probably shoulda been in it [100]," but by

this time, I think her reasoning was better. She said, "I did learn *some* stuff.  Just not

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*much*." And even when we met in the middle of the next semester she said, "I think it was a good thing to get placed in 100."

> J: How come?

> K: Cuz it helped me *be* a better writer, so...

I asked if she could tell me any specific ways in she believed herself to be a better writer (noticing her phrasing had switched from "I suck *at writing*," where writing is a thing, to "it helped me *be* a better *writer*" where being a writer is an identity).

> K: Not really. I Just... think it's better...

Among the reasons why, she cited, "More time to write" more than anything specific learned, which I read as a statement *for* the validity of her placement, keeping in mind the placement program's perspective that BW is designed to give less prepared or less confident writers more time writing in college before they get to CW.

But even if Kelly's placement turned out to be highly valid, I still argue there is a lot to learn from her story, and I will return to it in Chapter Five, where my goal is less to discuss the individual participants and their placement than to analyze their stories as exemplars of what can and does happen when students are placed into BW, or any lower level course.

**Later interview with Ashley.** When I met with her later in the semester, she told me, in a confessional tone,

> A: I kind of feel like—'cause I'm transferring next semester, and the college I'm transecting to doesn't accept this class, so I kind of feel like it's a waste? But I already paid for it so. . . I kind of wish that—now, I kind of wish I was in 101/ just so it would like transfer and stuff, but... I can't do anything about it so...

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What Ashley begins to reveal is a level of regret for not taking the placement procedure more seriously. I will return to Ashley below when I discuss how this same notion recurred in several of my interviews.

**Section Summary**

I began this study in part to see if I could peer into the underlife (Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995) of the culture of UWA's campus, to see if being a basic writ*er* there was a social burden that a student had to carry, and if as a result, the BW course would need to overcome this stigma in order to validate the placements into it. As it turned out, this notion of stigmatized social identity on UWA campus was not nearly as prevalent as I had imagined it would be, nor was it a major factor in how I would judge the appropriateness of any of my participants' placement. Yet, I did encounter a certain amount of Othering from most of the participants when it came to their view of the students in the class—sometimes including themselves. Above, Sam said,

> I just feel that like the kids who need to be there, who should be there, it's gonna help them—It's gonna help me too. But like the kids that need it, it's gonna really help them…. And then you can tell the people that are like… slower, that are in the class.

Renee also claimed that there were some kids who "know they belong there"; Ashley told me that the only way students could do poorly in BW was if they were "slackers"; and Lynn told the story of reading some of her writing to her roommate, who "couldn't *believe* that came outta me, since she thought that I was a One'er [BW student]."

Returning to Gee (1989, 1990, 1999, 2003, 2004), if one considers that the

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process of education *is* the process of assuming and exploring new identities, then I suggest that special attention must be paid to the power of the voice (at least in traditional placement) that places students into BW. Part of a program's attempt at developing valid placements (see Chapter One) must be an awareness of this power and the possibility that the inscription or re-inscription of hegemonic identity narratives—coupled with the power to interrupt more positive notions of self-as-student/writer—may dig a hole deep enough that the BW course itself cannot in the end become the most profitable course of action.

I am not saying that traditional placement should be done away with, for there are strong arguments that DSP serves just as much to support these same scenarios (Perry, 2008; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999). In Chapter Five, I will talk more about the notion of communication between the program and the incoming students, but for now it may be worth noting that the most plausible ways of addressing the issues I present here lies in the way such communications take place. Later, in Chapter Six, I will conclude by presenting specific ideas for keeping placement dialogical—that is, avoiding the potential negative consequences of both the issuing of institutional communiques and of leaving the decision entirely up to the student alone with no professional help between herself and her potentially harmful identity narratives.

In the next section, I turn to arguments—based on the qualitative, phenomenological data gathered here—for the validity of particular students' placement.

**Evaluating Placement through these Qualitative Data**

In the first section of this chapter, I spoke about some consequences of BW placement, particularly on the participants' notions of self-as-writer/student; but on this

evidence alone, my goal was not to conclude that anyone's placement was valid or

invalid.  Here, I attempt to speak more directly to the profitability of the decisions to

place these students into BW. It must be stated clearly up front, though, that I make these

evaluations *after the fact*; in other words, I am evaluating the decisions by looking at

evidence unavailable to the decision-maker at the time of the placement decisions: the

actual unfolding of the semester-long BW course. The argument here is that a placement

program cannot be validated without an examination of how the courses are working out

for the placed students (see Chapter Two).  In this section I attempt to use more

qualitative evidence to make these judgments than is often used in the literature on

placement validation; further, I attempt to provide concrete evidence—through the

examples of Sam and Twist—that the notion that course grades themselves provide

sufficient evidence to support the claim that BW was or was not the most appropriate

placement for a given student.

**Marks of Success: John and Lynn**

I mentioned above that Kelly's placement looked to be valid/successful given the

evidence I was able to accrue from getting to know her. I saw marks of success in the

way her stance toward her placement developed—her reasons for feeling that the course

was right for her—and in the way she developed some confidence in her writing (partly

through more time to spend on it); she even referred to herself as a better *writer* in our

last interview. This change pointed toward success in terms of the course goals at UWA,

and in terms of what Kelly seemed to need from BW. I do not know what grade she got in

the course; but I don't think it matters, since I know that she moved on to CW and

therefore must have passed. Also, Kelly claimed to be "happy with C's" (though some of

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her other statements revealed some frustration), so if she got a B- in the course, that might have been a great success for her, whereas if Sam got a B-, that would have been devastating. So, my argument for the validity of Kelly's placement is entirely aside from her GPA, at least to the point where she was able to earn a passing grade. In what follows, I consider the validity of two participants' placement, Lynn (discussed in the last section) and John (not yet introduced).

Lynn was the student who had the very strong identification with her personal writing (the one who planned to bequeath her diary in her will), but who also claimed to be terrified of writing (meaning school writing, or what she called "proper essays"). Lynn's notion of what made a proper essay was, "one where you do not get back like five million red lines."

We spoke more about this notion of being proper:

> L: I care about my writing, and I care about the meaning in my poems. . . And the
> fact that I can't get my point across / is what irks me? But / being proper about it,
> no one wants to have fun—it's not fun being proper. It's *never* fun to be proper.
> J: We're not talking about writing anymore are we?
> L: No.  In general, if you're gonna do something you like, you're gonna do it the
> way you wanna do it.  And no one—everyone hates being told what to do. / So / I
> hate it. Hahaha.

Lynn's view of being proper, of following any type of rules in writing, was that it only served to get in the way of her meaning.  She was most likely going to have a difficult time in any first year composition course—a subject that is so personally important to her.  Here is a quick glimpse of her position on writing poems in (K-12) school—where

the teacher prescribes a rhyme scheme:

> L: I hate rhyme schemes

I asked if she ever rhymes in her own poems:

> L: If I do, it's on accident, hahah.

She said she uses her own structures. I mirrored back: so if it's your structure, it's cool, but if its the institution's then it's bad. And she agreed, saying:

> L: Like, if you're gonna tell me how to write, then just write it yourself.

But as the semester progressed, Lynn began to turn around—in great part because her instructor engaged her on the level of what she brought into class, namely her poetry. He encouraged her personal literacy, exchanging poems with her (he was a poet as well), and his appreciation of her personal literacy (and literate identity) seemed just the encouragement she so badly needed.

> In the middle of the semester, I asked her how she was feeling about her school writing.

> L: I think I've gotten better. I'm more comfortable with my writing.

This statement is notable in a couple of ways. First, in terms of success in BW at UWA, comfort with writing is a strong measure; and, I think this statement shows greater course success than if she had said her grammar was better or that she was writing better thesis statements. With Lynn in particular, in my analysis, it was her resistance holding her back from success in school writing, and if BW was lowering that resistance, then it was turning out to be a highly sound course of action. In this sentence, she also calls school writing "my writing," which may be the first sign that her polarization of personal writing and *proper essays* was starting to merge. Again, I do not know how these signs of growth

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would have shown up on a transcript or even in a survey—in fact, I do not know if Lynn

herself would have attributed the meaning that I argue is there. But, she knew, and felt,

that the course was working for her; I agreed.

Lynn told me that her teacher and she were working on her poems together, but it

sounded almost as if in more of a workshopping sense, as if he was a mentor or

colleague, not a teacher in the traditional sense.  This type of encouragement from a

teacher was spilling over into her school writing, as was evident when she said,

L: I never thought of putting senses into a paper.

Knowing her feelings about being told what to do, and what not to do in a paper

(i.e., "if you're gonna tell me how to write, then just write it yourself"), it seemed clear

that this teacher found a way for *Lynn* to discover what works in academic writing, which

was just what she needed.  According to Lynn, it began to happen "when [the teacher]

helped me start writing more poetry and bringing me out of my shell."  It was no wonder

that at this point she told me that BW was her favorite class.

At our next meeting, Lynn had just been handed back her first paper, an A.

J: How'd that feel?

L: VERY good.

And later she said,

L: Having the English teacher be able to say, "You're doing good" is a lot better

than having the red ink all over the paper.  So it's more comfortable; I'm more able

to say, Okay, I can do this, instead of like, I do not know what to *do,* where to

*start*. . . duh du-duh.  I mean I'm still a procrastinator, but... [laughs].  It's easier,

more comfortable.... I mean, I *never* thought I could get a A on a paper before!

so... I was pretty exciting [through laughy smile].

J: Any sense of whether or not / the 100 decision was good for you, or.. . Just kinda lucky you got [this teacher]?

L: I think it was luck because I got him. I do not think it had anything to do with 100 versus 101. Because the teacher's the one teaching you; you learn more from that than from the subject...

J: How's your confidence going into 101?

L: Pretty high. I'm pretty excited about it.

And that seems to be another mark of great success. Getting to know Lynn, the way she protected her identity as *the writer* from all things school—from the red pen, as it were— even if she had been placed in CW initially, I do not see any way she would have been excited about it before her experiences in BW.

Our final correspondence was over email just after the next semester. I wrote to ask how CW ended up working out for her, and she replied: "The end of the semester for ENG 101 went really good passed with flying colors and even in my Phil 400 class wrote a Chapter about the Reality of Holes for my final that went really well." Run-ons or not, this message is a strong sign of a BW placement that worked out about as well as one could hope.

**John's BW placement.** John, another fairly traditional UWA student (18 years old, white, working class family), was not as resistant as Lynn to his initial placement, but he did feel that the prompts for the essay were quite alienating.[2] John came from a

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[2]I have to rely on my field notes when referring to my first interview with John because of a mistake I made with the voice recorder, the reason I did not include him in the findings of the previous section.

rural town in Pennsylvania, from what he describes as a "hunting family."  He does not read a lot, but he loves Jim Morrison's lyrics. Being a former Doors enthusiast myself, I found this easy to relate to. From the way he could recite lines of Morrison's lyrics and poetry, it was clearly that John had an appreciation for literacy, but like Lynn, he found school literacy to be quite distinct from his personal interests. He described his reaction to the essay prompts (see Appendix D). There were two prompts: one about reading, and one about writing.  Both asked students to respond to a few short passages from authors who John found to represent a type of school literacy that he found anything but welcoming. He realized before even writing his essay that if *this* was what UWA meant by writing/literacy, he must not be very literate.

It is impossible to say whether this notion affected his performance on the essay to the extent that it would have made the difference of BW versus CW placement.  In that first interview, sensing his feelings about UWA's view of literacy, I felt that I could relate to these feelings. Then, I asked him to imagine that he walked into the exam room, opened the packet, and saw that he was being asked to write an essay about a Jim Morrison lyric.  He paused, looked at me, as said, "I just got chills," and smiled.

I took from this interaction that John was in a similar place to Lynn, though less as an author and more as a reader. I sensed that he was ready to be awakened, as it were, and had been most likely held back by an institutionalized view of literacy that told him that his interests were not real literacy—just like Lynn's experience. In our second interview, John was clearly having a good time in BW.  He too had discovered—for himself, with the *help* of the teacher—the power of using imagery in his writing.

John: Like, I never, before—like, something that she did was—I never thought

that like putting that much detail into stuff was important.  And like that's why my

papers were never long enough. Cause I did not put enough detail, cause I did not

think it was important.  But it is cause like, it provides like the visionary... aspect,

like you can actually see it; and I did not think that was important before, but now

I realize... it is.

He continued later:

John: I think that rather than having three topics filling up a page, you're better off

having one topic with a lot of detail filling up the page—like, that's something I

realized.

Josh: When did you realize that do you think?

John: Like I, like, I just realized all of a sudden—Wow! [laughs, excited].

In fact, John describes the excitement of a whole peer group in his class, all learning this

principle together:

John: This one kid, his paper was like only two pages long.  And like, *us* three, we

were just like, You never said what instrument you played, and—He was like,

"Wow! I can write a whole 'nother two pages with this stuff!"  You know, it's

really helpful.

John, again similar to Lynn, credits his particular BW teacher for this growth:

John: She, like, focuses on your strengths and… and plus the topics she has us

write about so far are about *us*; they're not about something... you know...

Another sign of growth was that John began to take influence from other authors,

mimicking their style. He read me a passage from a paper, one with a very long, vivid

sentence, which he was clearly very proud of—even though he said that some teachers

might call it a run-on (it was not).  I asked him,

> Josh: What do you think about that, what you just read to me?  What do you think
>
> about the writing?
>
> John: [Taken a little aback] I actually think it's pretty good [laughs].
>
> Josh: Yeah! I think it's pretty good too.
>
> He told me that he had taken influence from Annie Dillard, the way she uses long,

winding sentences—reflecting on the notion of learning through modeling:

> John: You do not just learn from your own mind; you gotta take little bits and
>
> pieces from other people's things.

In statements like this, I see that John was learning—for himself—about the nature of

literacy as a social practice (Gee, 2000; Street, 1984; Vandenberg, Hum, & Clary-Lemon,

2006), something the UWA program should be proud of. John had not attempted such

modeling before in his schooling. This class was clearly succeeding for John, tapping into

his appreciation of writing/literacy in ways that his earlier schooling—and even the essay

prompts at UWA—had not.  John also had a strong sense of *what* he was learning *as* he

was learning it, which I think is another sign of the success of this course for him.

As we concluded that interview, John told me that he had written a poem in the

time since our last meeting. His teacher said it was too morbid, but he did not take that as

anything other than a personal response. The fact is he was bringing in his own writing to

his BW teacher. He gave me a copy of the poem, clearly influenced—which John

acknowledged—by Jim Morrison's lyrics. I do not think John will become a poet—like

Lynn—but I find his experiences in BW to be uplifting for many reasons, not the least of

which is that he felt inspired to write this poem.  As with Lynn, it is impossible to say

whether this success story was more a factor of BW placement or the luck of the draw in ending up with this teacher. However, the fact that this course (and the placement into it) worked out so well is something that reflects well upon UWA's placement program, and hopefully provides insight into ways that this program can continue to provide such well matched courses to students like John and Lynn.

These three students—Kelly, Lynn, and John—show the type of experience with BW that indicates validity of placement, since the consequences of the course (both in terms of learning about writing, and in the larger arena of identity as writer/student) indicate high levels of profitability to the student. The types of growth I see with the students, upon which I predicate my argument for the validity of their placements, may or may not be discernible from a transcript, a satisfaction survey, or other more quantitative measures. If these data were missed in a validity inquiry, the program would be missing vital information about the job it is doing.

On another note, while I think that BW was a valid placement for each student, it is important to realize that they were not all valid for the same reasons, which is why a phenomenological framework was particularly well suited for this inquiry. "Phenomenology," as Van Manen (1990) said, "is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable" (p. 7). I see no reason to assume that BW placement will be a valid or invalid decision for different reasons, depending on the student. What is more, these three students didn't *need* BW for the same reason (nor should we expect all student to) and so of course the class will not profit them in the same ways. These factors, to me, are part of the benefit of UWA's using the expert reader model for placement decisions, because rather than predetermining why

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any given student will need BW (as other models may do), the expert reader model looks at writing case by case, and seeks to determine whether this particular writer would benefit more from BW or CW.

**A Note on Quantitative Validation**

In Chapter Two, I began with composition placement validity inquiries that I thought to be problematic because the primary lines of evidence used or advocated in these studies were grades and retention rates (Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen, 2008; Blakesley, 2002; Dryer, 2008; Hansen, et al., 2004; Isaacs & Molloy, 2010; James, 2006; Jones, 2008; Peckham, 2006; Reinheimer, 2007; Reynolds, 2003; White, 2008; Ziegler, 2006), which, added together, seemed to define most authors' notions of success in composition. Jones (2008), as I discussed, did ask the key questions, "How should success be measured?" (p. 61), but even then, his answers were primarily GPAs and pass rates in the courses, though he did mention surveys for students about their perceptions of their success in the course, and surveys for teachers about their views of students' attitudes. I also criticized Gleason (2000) for her statement,

> Clifford Adelman points out, transcripts "tell us what really happens, what courses students really take, the credits and grades they really earn, the degrees they really finish and when those degrees are awarded" (p. vii).

And I said then that, in my study, I hoped to show that there is more to what *really happens* than the can be seen in a student transcript; and that, in fact, what a transcript says can sometimes belie what really happens.

**Validation by grades.** Two participants in particular help present an interesting wrinkle in the theory that grades (alone) mark success in composition, that they tell us

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what really happened. I speak of the two arguably most misplaced students: Sam and Twist. Sam got an A, but I take that as a mark of misplacement, not of valid placement in her case.  In fact, upon receiving high grades in the course, Sam said,

> S: When I got this paper back, I was even pi—*more* mad?  Because, like, it shows, like, I got a 100%.  Like, I really, like, feel, like, this shows... like, I shouldn't really BE in the class.

A problem exists on several levels: first, if grades are being used on a broad scale to validate placement programs/procedures, and if there are Sams out there—getting A's, but because of less valid placement, and taking them as signs of frustration, and further helping them reify the linear progression of learning to write—then how much is overall GPA information skewed by these grades? Or perhaps Sam's A can help show that grades may be better evidence of high misplacement (since the students will have lower grades or fail if they are placed above their levels) than of low misplacement.  I wonder, then, What are the signs of low misplacement? As I hope I have shown thus far, low misplacement is not a low-stakes matter, something Messick (1989b) addressed when he stated, "concern with minimizing underpredictions, or the proportion of rejected individuals who would succeed if given the opportunity, is also an important social value" (pp. 79-80). Overall, I do not know what information can be gleaned from Sam's A on its own—either for the validity of her own placement or as a contribution to the larger question of UWA placement decisions overall.

I think the same is true for Twist, who failed the course. I do not believe that he failed the course because it was too hard. I say this after numerous meetings and communications with him over the course of his first year at UWA. In fact, his initial

complaint about the course was that it was not challenging. I worry that if he had gone to a school with more levels of composition—with courses before BW, such as ones focusing solely on sentence or paragraph construction—that his F would have indicated that he belonged in a course below BW, which I think would have been a terrible course of action, since this type of course would most likely push him further into resistance, frustration, and boredom.

Is it possible that both Twist's F and Sam's A actually say the same thing—that both should have been placed in CW? If so, what does this say about the use of grades as validity evidence? In my attempts to evaluate the placement decisions of certain participants, I have tried to point out that the role of the actual grade achieved in the course was often negligible (sometimes irrelevant) to the argument. Lynn got an A, and for her, this was indeed a mark of success in a writing course, and this grade for Lynn says the opposite of what Sam's A said—that is, Lynn's A shows that her BW course was just the right place for her. Lynn had never gotten an A on a paper before, and she told me she never thought she could. What this A did for her is not capturable by a consideration of the letter alone.  Further, while I do not know Kelly's final grade, I know that she moved on to CW, and that she was doing well (to her) there. I imagine her grade was a low B, considering our discussions of her grades as the course happened; but as I noted, a B- in BW for Kelly said something very different than that same B- would have said for Lynn—not to mention Sam.

As Chapter Two proceeded, the studies I reviewed got stronger in terms of the multiple and varied lines of evidence used to argue for the validity of a placement program. O'Neill (2003), for example, discussed the use of final grades as one line of

evidence, but she triangulated these numbers with the number of students moved during week one (as a result of the first-week essay—a key part of UWA's placement procedure), teacher impressions, exit exams, and "student's impressions—collected during and especially after the course—of the degree to which the course met their needs" (p. 55). So it is not as if every validation effort out there is using grades alone to validate composition placement. However, it surely seems to happen enough that I believe the present argument deserves to be made.

## Concrete Findings and Suggestions

As a final part of this chapter, before I move on to broader social concerns, I want to make note of certain concrete issues (positive and negative) that could be useful for the ongoing validation of UWA's placement program.

### Finishing the Placement Procedure: Transparency and Instructor Buy-in

One conclusion I draw from my data is that the assessment procedure must be finished thoroughly. What I mean is that, as described before, part of UWA's placement procedure entails that BW instructors assign an essay during the first day (or first week) of class, in order to spot possible misplacements—a procedure that comes from Smith (1992, 1993), who used it as a way to further ensure the best possible placement for Pitt students. Such efforts may take more transparency and buy-in from both teachers and students. This first-week essay is indeed a part of the placement procedure—O'Neill (2003), as mentioned just above, used the number of students moved as a line of validity evidence for the placement procedure as well—and therefore, if instructors are not aware of its importance, the soundness of the entire procedure would be threatened because not all students would be receiving the same consideration in terms of their most appropriate

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placement.  For an example, I turn to Sam's experience.

I asked Sam about her class's first-week essay, since she began our interview by criticizing the placement program/procedure for (mis)placing her in BW. Sam reported that her instructor—upon giving the first-week essay prompt—informed the class that in her 20year s of teaching BW at UWA, she had only ever exempted five students.

> Sam: So I'm like, Alright, whatever—I wasn't really even trying on this paper cause I knew like—five people in like 20 years…
>
> Josh: Oh, she told you that BEFORE hand?
>
> S: She told us ahead of time, "I've only pass five people in the whole 20 or 18 years I was here."  That, that kind of made me really mad cause I was, like, really excited to get the opportunity to, like, move out of the class. . . . And after she said that I'm kinda like… I was really mad, cuz, then what's the point of doing it? She didn't really give me any confidence, like…. So I was like, Well I'm not even really gonna try on this paper cause there's no point, like, FIVE out of how many people? So, I just like wrote the paper…

From this account, it does not seem as if students in this teacher's BW sections are undergoing the same (or at least the intended) placement procedure in full.  Sam continued her story:

> S:  [T]he next day in class, she pulled me aside, and she's like, "Your paper was really good, um… You could go on to College Writing, but there's somethings you could work on."  So, like, I was like so close and she's like, "Ah well, you're staying in this class."  So I was like… I don't know.
>
> J: It sounds like she was give you some… power there to… to move up if you

wanted to.  Did you decide you didn't want to?

S: I told her—well I told her, I was like, If I can, I definitely wanna move outta this class cause…I told her, "No offense to you, but I, like, I just said like, I need like, other like, credits." And she's like, "I just think another… writing—or another class of writing would be good for you, but that's why—I just wanted to let you know your paper was really good."  And so—like I was like "uhhh" – She kinda like told me I like, had it but *not*… uh… I was mad.

J: Do you feel like you could've… It sounds like she was opening the door for you to say, like, Alright, let me out.

S: Yeah.

J: I mean, was she? Or was—

S: She… was… I don't know, cause I said I wanna move out, like I wanna move out. She was, Well I think an extra writing… is good for you.

For all intents and purposes, this teacher did see that Sam was misplaced, but perhaps she may not have realized the power she wielded when *suggesting* that BW might still be good for Sam. It's not entirely clear why Sam did not take the opportunity to move up to CW, since her tale implies that this teacher was giving her that chance. But from Sam's experience, she felt as if the subtext was that she was not allowed to move into CW.

Again, I argue that teachers need full buy-in with these first-week essays, or the validity of the expert reader model is threatened. This check on the students' placement is part of the procedure, and it helps ensure that they are in the most appropriate class.  If some teachers are doing it and some are not—or they are doing it very differently, there

may be a real problem for the whole program because it puts luck into the equation. That is, if students who are misplaced into BW and end up in section X may have a chance to challenge their placement, but students who end up in section Y will not have that chance, the placement procedure is then no longer the same for everyone, depending up the luck of their scheduling.

Renee also told me about her instructor's administration of the first-week essay, during which she had the class read the essays out loud and then publicly asked certain student if they wished to move up to CW.  Renee continued:

Renee: Um, she—we just wrote about how we hated writing, actually.  And then we just read it out loud and some people she just asked if you wanted to move up, and… like she didn't really do anything with it, I don't know.

Josh: Okay, and did people did most people say yeah, they wanted to move up?

R: Um, I think two or three did.

J: And so they just got up?

R: Yeah.

J: So I'm imagining you would've been hoping she would say that?

R: She did not really say anything about mine.  . . . And I did not really feel like / I do not know, I. . . I talked to her after class about it; I was like, "Well, should I move up or not?" And she was like, "Well, you can if you want to, but this class would be really good for you, it would help you for next time"; so I was like "okay."  And I really do not like writing so.... She said that she could probably like try and make writing fun.  I was like huh, well, if I have a chance to do THAT I might as well take it.

J: Yeah. Has that been your experience at all so far?

R: Yeah? It's pretty close.  It's not "fun" cause I don't think it'll ever be fun, but…
she makes it more interesting than it… has been.

There is a positive element to Renee's experience.  Renee got to speak to her
actual classroom professor about her placement—after the teacher had read (heard)
Renee's writing.  It sounded to me more like a dialogue than in Sam's case.  However,
considering that this process is indeed part of the larger placement procedure, I find it
troubling that a teacher would handle it this way.  Given the stakes—financial, personal,
social—I think that this part of the placement procedure should be as private as the other
parts; further, I am concerned that Renee's story shows an instructor employing data-
gathering techniques that are different than other instructors are doing, or at least with
what the placement model would have them do, which potentially introduces construct-
irrelevant variance into the procedure (since a student's placement can vary based on the
section he is assigned to, which is irrelevant to the construct of his writing
abilities/potential).  The reasons some teachers perform this element of the procedure
differently are beyond the scope of this study, but the fact that they seem to be suggests
that they may not fully understand or may not have full buy-in into the importance of this
first-week essay as an integral part of the validity (and reliability) of UWA's placement
procedure.

**Student buy-in/awareness.** In addition to Sam's and Renee's stories, I found that
some students did not realize the stakes of the first-week essay. Twist, for example,
believed that his teacher had not administered the essay.  I asked if he had possibly
missed the first class, but he was adamant that he had not missed a class and that no

placement check-in procedure was administered.

I spoke with Twist's instructor later in the semester, and she told me that she did have them write on the first day of class—but that she may not have been entirely explicit about the purpose (or stakes) of this writing. Therefore, there seems to be a confluence of low teacher buy-in (or understanding of the importance of the first-week essay) and lack of communication about the purpose of the first-week essay—between the program and the instructor, and between the instructor and the students. Stronger communication between and among all parties could have had several benefits in Twist's case: first, there is the chance that if he knew that this essay was his chance to prove he belonged in CW, he might have put in effort to ensure he was moved up; also, if the teacher still did not feel he was ready for CW, there is the chance that Twist's belief that his placement was wrong might have been mitigated. Neither of these scenarios may be likely, but without clearer communication about this final component of the placement procedure, neither is possible.

**ENG 100 Portfolio**

On a more positive note, UWA's policy of allowing BW students, if they receive an A in the course, to submit a portfolio of work that can potentially pass them out of CW had very positive effects on Sam. I had the chance to speak with Sam in the middle of the spring semester.

> Josh: How are you feeling at this point about / the placement in the class? 'Cause we were talking about that last time. Are you glad at this point you're in this class, cause you're doing well? Or do you think you'd wanna be in a class that was more challenging?

Sam: If I get exempt from 101? that's, I'll be *glad* I took this class? But If I do not,

I'll be / like / kinda really mad.

Later, as we discussed her upcoming papers, Sam said,

S: If we did not have this option [exemption], I prolly wouldn't care / that much / about my paper.

J: So you're trying harder because you know...

S: Yeah.  I know if that was not an option, I would just / write whatever, and / not

care as much.

She ended up submitting a portfolio from BW to the writing program and was

able to get exemption from 101.  So in the end, Sam took one composition class, not

unlike if she had been placed into 101 originally. But in the last statement above, the

effects of the portfolio are shown to clearly have more of a benefit than simply getting

Sam out of another English class. Knowing she had this option, she pushed herself more

than she might have otherwise. Or at least, knowing about this option, she did not put her

BW class at the bottom of her priorities, which she implies she might have.  From this

view, this portfolio, at least for Sam, created some positive washback where she got more

out of the same curriculum than she would have if the program did not offer the portfolio

option—or, of course if Sam had not known about it.  Not all of my participants seemed

to realize they had this option—though this may be a factor of their being less likely to be

qualified to submit. Nevertheless, this exemption option might create even more positive

washback for potentially resentful BW students if they are more clearly aware from the

beginning of the portfolio exemption possibility. (In fact, I wonder if the need to receive

an A in the course, in order to be eligible for portfolio submission, should be reconsidered

or at least relaxed; for if a student's portfolio of work indicated to the WPA, or others

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within the writing program, that she ought to be exempt from CW, the issue of whether she received an A or a B in the course seems less material. That is the topic of another larger discussion.)

**The Role of the Teacher**

The two greatest success stories, in my estimation, are John and Lynn, both of whom could easily have been turned off by BW; but it was clear in their interviews that these students believed it was their specific teachers who turned their BW placements into success. Lynn and I spoke about this at length; I even asked her if she thought her success was due to BW as a course, or the luck of having her teacher in the class. As shown above, she replied, "I think it was luck because I got him. I do not think it had anything to do with 100 versus 101."

The conclusion I draw here is simple: a school needs great teachers teaching BW; it should not be staffing BW with teachers who do not want to be there, with anyone else qualified to teach BW only under the theory that it is *just* Basic Writing—anyone can teach it. I commend UWA for consistently staffing its BW courses with the most qualified teachers—not taking the position that it is *just* Basic Writing, so all it needs is basic teaching. It may be possible that a good teacher, one who believes in the students, who sees the literacies they bring in with them, who sees their diverse educational backgrounds as potential—not deficit—may be even more needed in BW than in CW. I cannot support this claim since I didn't study CW students; but my data does show the real need for this type of teacher in a BW course, and UWA seems to realize this for the most part.

**Chapter Four Summary**

In this Chapter I attempted to keep my focus on the more personal side of the matter of social consequences as validity evidence. I attempted to discuss validity issues (and evidence) arising from my personal conversations with BW students, and where appropriate, I tried to argue for or against the validity of their placement based upon the premises of such personal data, rather than on information that could have been gathered without personal contact (e.g., grades, surveys). The findings presented here are meant both to provide information to UWA's placement program about the quality of its decisions as assessed through this type of evidence; and also, to demonstrate the types of data that can arise from such qualitative inquiry, and how these data can provide (or counter) evidence for validation in a way that is more in line with the types of evidence that current validity theory demands than is generally provided in composition placement validation literature (see Chapter Two).

CHAPTER FIVE

EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES EMBEDDED WITHIN THE

TRANSCRIPTS

In this chapter, I will attempt to raise and investigate issues beyond the context of

UWA alone, for my part of intent in this study was that my findings would speak to

college composition placement validity, and even educational placement validity more

broadly. In Chapter Two, I discussed at some length the notion that validity is a social

matter, no longer considered to be simply a matter of test accuracy. Social issues are

broader than one context, one program—though they exist there as well. Below, I attempt

to apply themes that emerged from my participant interviews to larger, more critical

social issues of composition placement, thereby aiming to present a working model of

what Perry (2008) calls Critical Validity Inquiry (CVI). In this chapter, I will sometimes

view my specific participants as exemplars of what can and does happen to those placed

in BW, more than as individual cases. In other words, I will attempt to address the

*societal* side of *social consequences* as they emerge from my data. At times I will re-

address and re-analyze pieces of dialogue from Chapter Four, but this time with an eye

toward the larger social issues that are represented therein.

The structure of Chapter Five will reflect this shift in concern from the personal to

the social as well in that I will organize the discussions around the emerging themes and

the way these themes arose from the participant interviews, rather than organizing the

discussions around the storyline of each participant (which was more the case in Chapter

Four).

**Preliminary Note on Generalizability**

I must note that when I discuss broader applications of the lived experiences of my participants, I am not aiming to speak about *generalizability* (see Shavelson & Webb, 2009, for overview). The very nature of phenomenological inquiry is that it researches the particular, or as Van Manen (1990) said, "Phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable" (p. 7). Looking for what the unique experience of the individual has to offer—as opposed to a concern for the ways in which all individuals' experiences are the same—seems to fall outside of a concern for generalizability, as traditionally conceived. But that does not mean that the unique, particular lived experience of individuals has nothing to offer on a broader level—beyond the individual person, beyond the particular site. I think here of what Stephen M. Fishman (2008, personal communication) described as a search for "insight, not proof." In other words, the goal of this chapter is to derive insights from what these individuals have lived through in order to shed light on the possibilities of what others may be living through; to use the fact that some indeed live through certain experiences as a way of understanding what others may be living through. A different theoretical conceptualization may be what Roth and Ercikan (2009) described as Bourdieu's notion of *analogical reasoning,* in which a "particular instance of the possible" is the subject of interest, rather than "the extraneous and artificial application of formal and empty conceptual constructions (cited in Roth & Ercikan, 2009, p. 5), which Bourdieu equated with generalizability. My goal, then, will be to both privilege the unique in the experiences of my participants and to derive critical insight into the larger systems in which these experiences took place; whether we terms such a goal

*generalizability* seems a matter of secondary importance.

**Messages Sent and Messages Received**

Chapter Four ended with a series of concrete findings that directly spoke to UWA's placement program. In particular, I found that some students were not given a first-week essay, or that their experiences of it were rather inconsistent; also, I found that the ENG 100 portfolio had a very positive effect on one of my participants (Sam)— another finding that UWA's program could find immediately useful. I chose to save one finding for Chapter Five because, while I think it does speaks directly and immediately to UWA's placement program, I also think it leads into broader issues of placement beyond the context of UWA, the domain of the present chapter.

This finding concerns the amount of miscommunication between the participants and the program, the sheer volume of intended messages sent by the institution that were not received by the students. To be sure, incoming students could ever be expected to understand composition placement the way that those in placement programs do—the reasons behind placement practices, the potential consequences, the way composition functions in a particular curriculum, etc. I argue here, however, that a program might need to go further in unpacking the implicit assumptions that underpin its communications to students; that is, what is a program *assuming* that incoming students will realize, will take seriously, will understand? In Chapter Three, I took issue with a particular claim from Blakesley (2002): "[DSP] communicated the positive message to students that we respected their judgment" (p. 21). The first section of the present chapter aims to show exactly why I believe this type of statement (and more importantly, the tacit assumptions upon which it rests) to be problematic. The findings I present here provide

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insight into how students are hearing (or misreading) messages that the program itself

might assume to be clear, and how this issue may be problematic on both personal (i.e.,

how one individual may misread certain messages) and broader social levels (i.e., how

certain *types of* students, based upon social group memberships, may be less likely to

received intended messages from a program).

First, though, I note that while Blakesley's statement specifically regards a DSP

procedure, and while my study did not contain participants placed through DSP, I argue

that there still are important lessons to learn from attempting to honestly assess the degree

that incoming students are clearly receiving the intended messages of the placement

program. In what follows, I present a brief consideration of role that clear communication

of messages plays in both DSP and in traditional (that is, non-DSP) placement programs,

such as the one at UWA.

**The Importance of Messages Sent in All Placement Programs, Not just DSP**

  **Messages in DSP.**  At first glance, it might seem that the importance of students

receiving the program's intended messages about composition placement would be

greater for a DSP program than for a traditional one. DSP is predicated upon the notion

that students know what is best for them in regard to their composition placement (Royer

& Gilles, 1998).  As Reynolds (2003) put it,

> DSP relies on the premise. . . that students are better able to assess their own
>
> writing and reading abilities and decide for themselves whether they should enroll
>
> in English 100 or English 101 than are traditional placement methods. (p. 82).

But DSP also, equally yet implicitly, depends upon what the student knows of the

composition courses (and therefore, the university, the curriculum, even current

composition pedagogy) because if any given student does not have a clear grasp of what composition placement at a University even means or why it matters, then even if he does know his own writing and potential better than his would-be assessors, his *lack of* knowing the context of the university and curriculum in which the placement decision is made (e.g., Neal & Huot, 2003) puts the validity of the placement decision at risk. As Reynolds (2003) herself said, "The point of DSP is to guide students into the most appropriate course *for a specific curriculum*" (p. 70, my emphasis). So a rift between the messages the institution believes it is sending about the composition courses and the ones the student believes he is hearing may present a serious counterargument to the validity of, really the whole premise of, DSP.

Reynolds (2003) went on to say, "The orientation talks with students and printed program materials should *communicate clearly* those course goals and expectations whether they be up to date with current writing pedagogy or not" (p. 94, my emphasis). I ask, though, what if they do not communicate these things clearly? How can the program find out if they are or are not? Furthermore, what if they do not communicate these goals, but the program assumes that they do? What happens to the premise of DSP then?

My argument in this dissertation, the very premise of the study at its heart, is that one cannot substantiate statements such as Blakesley's (2002) without consulting the actual students who are the recipients of these messages. If these claims are not substantiated, but the validity of a placement program rests upon their truth, then the program's validity is clearly threatened.

Ironically, Blakesley (2002) reports a finding about what I see as a highly significant miscommunication, though he does not seem to think it is nearly as

problematic as I do: "Logistically, simply getting this information [about DSP] to the students proved to be difficult. (On our first pre-semester survey, only about half of the students said they had heard of directed self-placement.)" (p. 24). But I ask, if half of the students have not heard of (that is, received the intended messages about) DSP (directed *self*-placement), who is placing them? I think it is hard to claim any level of validity for DSP if a program is unsure that the students even know they are supposed to be choosing their composition course—and this might serve as powerful counter-evidence for Royer & Gilles' (1998) claim, "The peculiar feature of directed self-placement is that, in one sense, it can't really fail [i.e., be invalid]" (p. 70). Their reasoning is that,

> If nobody took our developmental writing class, it would be a choice that each student made *with his or her eyes open*; our brochure and our orientation talk would *make sure* of that much. (p. 70, emphases added).

But if Blakesley's findings are representative, that is, if only about half of the students have their "eyes open," then DSP's validity in serious trouble; consequently, Royer and Gilles really should not make such claims that their brochure and orientation talk "make sure of" without researching whether this is the case. Clearly, then, the degree to which the messages sent by the program match up with the messages received by the students has a major impact on the validity of a DSP procedure. Yet, I suggest that this match up has more of an impact on the validity of a traditional placement procedure than may be obvious at first glance.

**Messages in traditional placement.** For traditional placement procedures (by which I mean any procedure where the program makes the placement decisions), consider how the same poorly received messages of the meaning and consequences of

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placement might play out: If a student does not receive clearly the intended messages

about the placement process (not only the mechanics of it, but the stakes as well), she

might be less likely to have a well founded opinion about the best course for her, which

could be likely to affect the effort she puts in to her placement assessment—whether

preparing for a timed-essay, carefully assembling a portfolio, or any other effort that a

person who really understands what is at stake might take. (I realize I can only phrase this

as presumption right now—the very complaint I had with much of the placement

literature—but I assure the reader that my phrasing is rhetorical, and these statements are

fully based on my findings.)  If these messages are not clearly received, and if such

diminished communication indeed affects her performance on the writing sample(s), then

her placement decision could be based more on her ability to clearly receive institutional

messages than her writing abilities or potential—which would create construct-irrelevant

variance in the placement procedure (unless, that is, the BW curricular goals include the

developing of this ability to better receive institutional messages), a major source of test

invalidity (Messick, 1989b).  So I argue that the issue of communication and

miscommunication between the program and the student is of great relevance to

traditional placement, not just DSP, and that it may serve as a strong threat to the validity

of any writing assessment.

I now turn to the data, where the actual students speak about the messages they

(believed themselves to have) received from the placement program at UWA. As I

proceed, my aim is to examine first how the participants, as individuals, lived through the

experiences related to placement, and then to consider how each participant can serve as

a model through which to examine the types of experiences that types of students (via

social group membership) may be living through.

**Messages Received by the Participants**

   **Ashley and the purpose of the portfolio.** Ashley presents an example of how

one student understood the importance of composition placement differently than the

school might have believed. I bring her up because she submitted a placement portfolio—

which I would have assumed was a mark of someone who did understand enough about

composition placement to take extra measures to ensure appropriate placement.  What

Ashley said surprised me.

   Ashley: ... I just, like, did it [the portfolio] to get it over with, so. . . that was. . .

   [trailing off]

   I: Were you trying to place out [of BW]?

   A: [quietly] no.

   I: So you weren't surprised.

   A: Mmm mmm.

As we continued speaking, I heard a student experience of portfolio assembly that

essentially flew in the face of portfolio assessment literature (e.g., Elbow & Belanoff,

1986; Hamp-Lyons, 2007).

   A: I kind of like, I feel like I woulda been in 101, but I just like BS'd the portfolio

   cause I didn't really wanna do it.  So I just like...

   J: Why did you...?

   A: Cause my mom was like, "You should do this."

   J: So, how do you BS a portfolio though? I thought they were, like, BS-proof.

I was struck at this point because, as far as I understand it, the major benefit of the

portfolio is that it provides assessors with the richest possible data from which to draw

conclusions about students' writing (Camp, 1993; Elbow & Belanoff, 1986; White, 1993;

Yancey, 1999). As such, the portfolio shows great progress from the old 'writing-less'

assessment (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009) of multiple-choice tests where a student

could just fill in random bubbles if she did not care or understand the importance of

placement assessment. But talking with Ashley, I heard that she basically did just fill in

random bubbles. I partly include this observation as a side note to provide a student

perspective of the portfolio that may be very different from what most in the field of

composition expect. Back to how Ashley BS'd the portfolio:

> J: So, how do you BS a portfolio though? I thought they were, like, BS-proof.
>
> A: I do not know. Like, I just put in papers and like, I feel like I didn't / put in
>
> papers the right way, as they wanted them?
>
> J: And did you write a reflection for it? [A key component of the portfolio]
>
> A: [thinking, quietly] I don't remember.
>
> J: Cause that's part of it.
>
> A: I don't know, if I did. . . . I didn't *care*.
>
> J: You didn't care cause you thought, I'll just get into 101 anyway? Or, I don't care
>
> which one I'm in.
>
> A: I didn't care which class I was in.
>
> J: If you had—Did you know that 100 didn't bear credit [at her new college;
>
> Ashley is transferring, and the BW credits will not count at her new school]?
>
> Cause that's...
>
> A: No, cause I, I did not know I was not gonna like, like it here. I did not know

how I was gonna feel about here, so I did not … I dunno.

In a way, Ashley represents a case where the very purpose of the portfolio—the collection of a richer, more genuine sample of the student's writing—is a message not received by the student.  But the fact is that, out of the 322 portfolios submitted that year, only Ashley and one other student were placed in BW. Considering those numbers, Ashley's treatment of the portfolio—or her apathy toward it as a method of assessment—seems quite anomalous. Perhaps the value of Ashley's story might not be in the example she presents of a student who simply does not get the portfolio; perhaps there is more to learn from the *reason* Ashley "BS'd" the portfolio: she did not care. Ashley did not care, and she missed the messages about the importance of placement, and the possible consequences of BW placement on her transfer process. The lesson I think that Ashley presents is about the interplay of these forces—not caring, missing messages of importance, and failing to realize the consequences of lower placement.

***Consequences, missed messages, and apathy.***  Later in the semester, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, Ashley told me that she felt BW was "a waste" because she was planning to transfer, and her new school would not take the credits.  At that point she said she wished she had been placed in 101 "just cause it'll, like, transfer and stuff, but... I can't do anything about it so...." If she had understood this particular consequence, I wonder what would have happened. While there is no way to know for sure, I suggest that if Ashley had receive the message, "If you want to transfer, BW credits will most likely not count at your new school," she might have at least taken the placement more seriously. Whether her efforts would have paid off in terms of higher placement, no one knows.  But simply considering the fact that 320 out of 322 students who submitted

portfolios were placed higher than BW, there is surely a strong possibility that if Ashley had not "BS'd it," she might have at least placed into CW if she had cared enough to assemble a proper portfolio.

*Apathy and construct-relevance.* The larger question to ask, though, is about whether it is okay for students' apathy—regardless of the reasons—to be affecting their placement.  In other words, if the construct of *apathy* (not writing abilities or potential and how this matches up with the college's composition courses) is playing a major role in the placement of a student like Ashley, does that threaten the validity of the decision (and in turn, the program) via construct-irrelevant variance? The answer to this question depends in large part upon the particular school and curriculum into which the students are being placed. At UWA, the BW course is in part meant to awaken the intellectual drive in students to the extent that initial apathy may be arguably part of the construct relevant to appropriate BW placement.  In Chapter Four, I presented some examples of students—particularly Lynn and John—whose passion for their own (school) literacy was surely inspired by the course. However, for schools where BW is more focused on basic skills—based more on the notion that students must know certain fundamental things, whether or not they are interesting, before they have what it takes to engage in college writing—the type of initial apathy seen in Ashley and others may be a sign that placement in this course would be a poor decision, that is, a decision where an alternative plan could have been more profitable, and further, the decision would be less valid because it would be based on a non-relevant construct (apathy).

*Ashley as a prototype of apathy.* A more critical, social analysis of this situation demands that we assess the reasons why someone like Ashley is so apathetic, because

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perhaps not all apathy is equal. Is the student apathetic because she does not understand what composition placement even is or why it matters (which seemed to be the case with Ashley)? If so, why does she not understand? Is she less likely to have a level of understanding if she comes from a home and community where fewer of the peers and adults go to or have gone to college themselves? (Less so the case with Ashley in particular.) Is her apathy as disguise for resistance to a curriculum with values contrary to her home, family, community (e.g., Irizzary & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2007; Ogbu, 1999). In such cases, it seems much harder to justify allowing student apathy to impact BW placement, for it would seem that those decisions would be dangerously close to placing people according to the types of communities into which they were born; and worse, tending to place the already less advantaged students into BW—a highly plausible instantiation of the type of social consequences Messick (1981, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1994) warned about. In other words, if the more apathetic students do not care because of home life (personal) factors—if they come from less formally educated homes and communities; if because of their traditionally marginalized status (social factors) they have been on the bottom end of their schooling for so long, they simply do not care— then this becomes much more of a social issue, one that brings in a greater threat of reproducing social inequities, and therefore must be considered in any validity argument (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b).

The counter-argument can surely be made that placement decisions should be based simply on how prepared individual students are for the colleges CW course, and that more prepared students are likely to be less apathetic—either as a cause of their record of achievement or as a result of it, or both. (And if this is the case, then apathy

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may be at least a highly correlative construct with writing ability.)  Further, it may seem

upon first glance that if such a student is indeed so far removed from caring about her

schooling, she may not be ready for CW, another reason to place her in BW. However,

until this line of argument can refute the notion that apathy and achievement might often

work in the opposite direction—that years of low placement and discouragement might

*create* apathy in a student, and that for her, another semester of a basic writing course

might just add to these feelings, taking her further away from the goals of most

composition programs—a program does not seem to have a sufficient theoretical

rationale to allow the construct of apathy to effectively place students into BW.

While this is not the typical place for recommendations for future research, I wish

to point out now that as part of a validation argument, these questions can and should be

addressed, even if through well designed surveys meant to assess which students' apathy

seemed to serve as a major factor in their placement, and who these students tend to be in

terms of SES, family and community education level, and so on.  Because, if significant

patterns emerge that suggest not only the influence of apathy on BW placement, but the

interplay of apathy and social status, a genuine threat to validity (as a matter of social and

ethical responsibility) may be occurring that would otherwise be overlooked.

**Lynn on the consequences of placement.**  Lynn serves as another example of a

student who seemed to misunderstand the consequences of doing poorly on the placement

essay, either as a cause or result of apathy. Even though I argued for the validity of Lynn's

particular placement in Chapter Four, I think her story can provide broader insight to

miscommunication issues in placement. I present data from early conversations with

Lynn, when she was more resistant to her BW placement.

Josh: Did you know what was at stake? That you were gonna get in—

Lynn: No, [I finish, "100"] I didn't understand the whole concept. I didn't think twice of it, either.

Immediately, Lynn displays a similar apathy to Ashley, one that I claim is interplays with the lack of clarity about the message of and consequences of BW placement.

I asked Lynn about her reaction to "opening that envelop" that contained her placement decision, and the following dialogue ensued:

J: Do you remember getting the decision? OK, here's the envelop, you open it, do you remember your reaction to that?

L: Um, well I opened the package and realized we had to write, I was like, "Crap. Another thing. Another PSSA [Pennsylvania NCLB essay exam]." I'm from Pittsburgh public schools. We were *trained* to write for the PSSAs. So what we were born and raised to do was perfect the PSSAs. So I figured it was just another one of those.

The first point of interest here is the miscommunication between the question I asked and the question Lynn answered, which although a small rift of messages, still seems to speak to this persistent tendency of my participants be in a situation where the messages they hear just do not align with the messages spoken to them. I (thought I had) asked Lynn about "getting the decision," but she told me what it felt like to be in the room where she took the placement test itself. What she told me is interesting and highly useful, but first I wanted to point out that even on this small level, if students are not hearing what we assume they are (our intended messages), then the answers we get may give us misleading data about the validity of their placement.

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The actual content of Lynn's answer regards the surprise she felt when opening the envelope. For whatever reason—whether she did receive the information but lost it, or disregarded it, or whatever might have happened—she entered the placement exam well behind the level of preparation that the placement program coordinators might have assumed, if they believed the students were receiving their messages about placement.

Considering the sheer number of messages sent to incoming freshman upon entering college, I would almost be more surprised if the bulk of students *did* receive the messages as intended by the placement program. I know that I have piles of paper work from my upcoming university job and that with every new packet sent to me, it's not my clarity that increases, but my stress and confusion. Plus, I have had university jobs before, so I know *now* what I need to pay more or less attention to (but only because I have put HR people through nightmares before). My point is that it seems understandable if Lynn might not have known what information was more important to heed and which to disregard.

*Social group considerations.* As Dryer (2008) pointed out, not every student "lives in a home in which official mail is routinely opened" (p. 9). But, if some students are (unintentionally) being placed in part by the construct of the extent to which their families do or do not routinely open official mail, then the validity of the decisions are threatened on several levels—including (a) construct-irrelevant variance (parents'/families' mail habits are most likely irrelevant to the BW curriculum, and therefore to the construct upon which students are placed there) and (b) possible perpetuation of social inequities (e.g., if families less likely to open official mail are often lower SES, and if their children are placed into lower level college courses—costing

more, taking more time—as a result; all of which might be the subject of future research).

The question then arises, If Lynn *had* received these messages about placement as intended, would she have used those PSSA skills that had been drilled into her by the Pittsburgh public schools, perhaps increasing her chances of CW placement? (Again, I speak here more broadly about students *like* Lynn, where we do not know that BW will turn out to be as profitable as it was for her.) Would she have asked someone to help her relate to the topic of the prompt? A teacher, a parent? Further, if she had known the potential consequences, and therefore been more likely to seek such help, would her placement be the same? There is no way to know, but if the answer is no, then a program may be faced with a student who is placed—at least potentially—by traits other than writing ability or potential, traits such as organization, ability to keep track of all the incoming information from her soon-to-be university, willingness to ask for help with understanding a writing task, ability to understand ahead of time the dangers that low misplacement may present, and even family traits ranging from their tendency to open official mail often to whether their own experience or lack thereof with college, educational placement, composition curricula, etc.

**Parental Involvement and Institutional Messages**

Above I argued for the need to look into plausible reasons why a student is apathetic; here I argue that an evaluation is needed to help us understand why someone like Lynn would be missing important messages about placement. Blakesley (2002) noted, when speaking of DSP decisions, "Ideally, students would carefully consider the options we presented them, perhaps with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors, then make the choice" (pp. 23-24). This is the ideal that we all aim toward. Problems arise,

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though, when (a) certain individual students have more support at home than others; and (b), more relevant to the critical nature of this chapter, when certain *kinds* of students (such as SES, family history of education, and traditionally privileged or marginalized cultural status) are likely to have more or less support than other incoming students, making them more likely to receive lower placement due to previous disadvantage. As I discussed above, assessment decisions that serve to tacitly benefit certain already-advantaged social groups over other, less advantaged groups present the potential for negative social consequences that would serve to threaten the validity of those decisions (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b).

**Twist and parental involvement.** Twist serves as another instance of someone whose lack of parental/custodial support at home may have put him at a great disadvantage in terms of catching the intended messages sent from the institution. As noted above, while the argument can be made that it is precisely this type of issue that leaves someone ill-prepared for college writing/discourse (making BW placement the most appropriate decision) the more social, critical counterargument must be made (and refuted): If individuals are being placed into lower levels of English courses based more on who (or where) their parents are than on whether their writing abilities/potential meet up with the BW curriculum, this is a serious counter hypothesis to the validity the placement, in part because BW placement gives the student an extra course she must take, making college take longer and cost more. Serving to reinforce/reproduce social inequities is a major negative social consequence that undercuts validity (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989b), and the effect of making college cost more and take longer for students with or from families with less money, which potentially makes finishing

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college—on average—less likely for those from poorer, less formally educated families, surely a reinforcement of social inequities.

In the last chapter, I mentioned Twist's contention that he received no information about the placement portfolio, and that he knew nothing of the essay prompts before entering the placement exam. This situation is where Twist's home life comes into play in ways that might not be apparent without a critical inquiry into the validity of his placement (Perry, 2008). On the surface Twist may look pretty irresponsible, or at the very least, he may look as if he did not know what was truly on the line with (the consequences of) his writing placement. Both of these claims may be true, of course, but I wondered who was there for him, looking out for these interests. There was no one. He had been raised by foster parents who, by the time he was ending high school, had essentially cut off any parental support. To Twist, his BW placement was his own fault.

J: Talk to me more about why it's your fault.

T: Prolly cuz I / I didn't, I didn't go the extra mile and try to see what the prompt was gonna be like; I didn't ask questions... ; I was just like, Okay, they're giving us a prompt, I'm gonna read it over a couple times [then write it...]

J: What should you have done?

T: Probably, um, talked to Advising and Testing before hand and see, see what was going on actually.

J: Who would have guided you to do that?

T: I didn't even know. That's why / I feel like I [all?] let down because I didn't go out and search long enough.

At this point, I asked about parents and custody, and found out that Twist was on his own

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as he entered the placement exam that day, unaware of the circumstances, and whether this was his fault or not, it seems at least plausible that his *essay* would be at a disadvantage when compared with those students who did receive the messages, and had help doing so.

   ***Twist and societal consequences.*** In the case of someone like Twist, the question is whether the underlying social circumstances (social group memberships) that left him without parental support—e.g., poverty, marginalization, institutionalized racism, little family history of education, long history of low family SES, home community that resists mainstream educational ideology—serve as part of the construct upon which his placement decision is made; while at the same time, students from more mainstream homes and communities are being placed more directly upon the construct of their writing and how it matched up with CW or BW. If so, are students like Twist more likely to be placed in BW due to the circumstances of their birth and group membership; will these placements help them overcome these social issues, or make college just enough more expensive to essentially reproduce this circumstances? These are the type of critical issues that must be refuted as part of a validity argument/inquiry (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006). Further, as Messick (1989b) emphasizes, these issues relate to the *meaning* behind someone like Twist's placement, not just the accuracy of the procedure that helped place him, and not just the fact that he succeeded or failed in the course. As I have been arguing, the only way to live up to Messick's call for examining the meaning of a test score (broadly considered), as part of validating the decisions made based upon that score, is to perform a critical inquiry into the lived experience of the actual students, to get close to certain actual individuals (Toma, 2000), as opposed to gleaning data from a

purely bird's eye perspective.

In a later section, I will discuss further how a purely numerical glance at Twist's particular placement would be unable to provide adequate evidence of the validity of his placement decision.

**Renee and parental involvement: Individual and social perspectives.** In Chapter Four, I discussed the fact that Renee had two complicating parental circumstances: First, she was home-schooled, so her mother was her only direct source of writing assessment, outside of yearly state audits; second, she became independent from her parents. As a result, she was left in a complex situation. On one level, Renee had never been assessed on a large scale the way most students have, which, as discussed in Chapter Four, left her feeling that she truly had no way of knowing if her writing abilities were *really* any good. On another level, she had no one helping guide her through college composition placement. As I have been arguing, a student who fails to understand the importance of placement may have a greater possibility of low placement than a student who does have a clearer understanding—or who at least has informed advocates at home—because if she feels there is less at stake she may be less likely to take the exam or placement materials seriously (Renee did not sleep the night before), doing less to prepare, overall giving herself a greater likelihood of a low performance on her placement exam/materials.

Renee ended up leaving UWA after one semester, unable to afford the tuition. Would she have taken the exam more seriously—say, slept the night before—if she had known (a) she realistically might be placed in BW ("I just assumed that it would pass"), and (b) if so, she would be spending more of the money she does not have on college as a

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result? And again I wonder, if she had put in more effort, would she have been placed in CW, and whether or not that could have had an impact on her persistence at UWA? There is obviously no way to know, but it surely seems that if she had put in her best effort, it would at least have been more likely. And this makes me wonder about how many students like Renee are placed into BW every year, and how many would indeed be placed in CW if they had received more clearly the messages about placement—in part because of help at home. Further, I wonder how—on an aggregate level—the financial cost of an extra college course might be presenting such students with just enough of a burden that, on average, they become less likely to stay in college. Again, Renee may or may not have been placed in CW if she had more support at home; and she may or may not have stayed at UWA if either of these were the case. My point here is to consider the bigger social picture, to consider the greater level of likelihood that membership in certain social groups brings along with it the types of privilege (or its lack) that valid course placement (and educational testing in general) should be aiming to overcome, or at least not serving to perpetuate.

I do not think these matters are easy to investigate without getting close to these students. That is, I do not see how Renee's story could have surfaced through more traditional means of validity inquiry—through grades, satisfaction surveys, students moved during the first week—with the exception of retention rates. But even that measure would show no data regarding the reasons why Renee left school, and whether this had anything to do with BW placement, or whether deeper underlying factors served to facilitate both.

**Parental Involvement Summary.** The critical question regarding parental involvement is, how much does a placement program (no matter what procedure it employs) implicitly count on the possibility that incoming students will have someone to help guide them through all the unfamiliar decisions coming their way? Further, if those involved in the program are counting on such help, without even realizing it, at what disadvantage are the students who do not have it, either because they do not have the parental support, or because their parents never went to college and therefore may not have the type of insider information that other parents likely have? This last question necessarily raises the more critical issue of whether or not, if this is the case, such placements (and programs) are therefore helping to reproduce the privilege of students from more nuclear and more highly educated families, placing those outside of this assumed norm into BW at a higher rate than should be the case. Following the lead of validity theorists like Kane (1992, 2006, 2008), I suggest that part of placement program validation must involve the explicit and honest attempt to unpack these type of implicit assumptions; and in this section, I hope to have presented some concrete ways in which these assumptions, if left implicit, could present real problems to real students.

**Section Summary**

**Possible Reasons for Missing Messages.** At this point, I want to reflect upon some of the reasons that—outside of simple negligence on the student's part, which may also be a factor—the messages the institution assumes to be clear may be much less clearly received by the student, since I have been arguing that such lack of clarity may be

affecting BW placement for some students more than it should, and more than it is for others.

- Students may have very different levels of help from parents/other adults, or simply no one to help receive the messages.  This is exemplified by Twist, Renee, and Lynn in particular.

- The consequences of placement seem too abstract to be taken seriously.  Ashley and Lynn seemed to struggle with this. They knew about the placement, but only in a vague sense, and neither seemed to realize the potential impact it could have on her life until it was too late for her to take steps to be placed into 101.

- Possibility of BW placement seems so unlikely, the messages seem not to apply. Renee and Twist display this trait somewhat; Sam is a quite clear example of someone who had so little reason to believe BW placement was a possibility, her failure to take the messages about placement seriously seems almost inevitable.

- Too many messages from school to know which are important.  I add this one in, though I do not think any participant said it directly.  But the fact is that, as I said above, I find it hard to blame an incoming student for not knowing which messages sent from the school are more and less urgent, which need action and which are perhaps noise.

My purpose in developing this rough taxonomy is to present a way that those involved in placement might keep on the look-out for ways in which students could be placed in BW as a result of miscommunication, more than as a result of their match-up with a particular BW curriculum. For example, if some students are missing messages because the notion of placement seems so remote, seems to be part of a future life that

seems unreal, then this might affect ways the program communicates to these students—it might help them seek to make the matter seem more actual, less abstract, etc. Or, if some students coming from more traditionally marginalized communities are tending to have less informed parental support, then the program might want to re-examine its implicit assumptions about the types of help it expects the incoming students are getting at home.

As my interviews and analyses show, some students do indeed struggle with receiving the messages intended by the program—for a number of reasons—and I argue that their placements may be at least potentially based upon this difficulty. This information may serve as a rival hypothesis to claims such as Royer and Gilles' (1998), "Freshmen come to the university hyper-aware of their educational background, their capabilities, and the promise of success. They generally have a good sense of where they stack up in comparison to their peers" (p . 68), a statement which, if refuted, severely attacks the validity of their particular placement program.

Once again, a large part of my purpose in this dissertation as a whole is to demonstrate that empirical evidence to support or refute such claims is indeed gatherable, and therefore that this type of claim—seen in a lot of the DSP literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3—can and must be supported, not left as guesswork.

Despite the fact that this statement was made about a DSP program, I have attempted to show both the problem with assuming that students are receiving the messages the program hopes and believes they are, and further that the issues of communication/miscommunication is just as much a factor in traditional placement methods as it is in DSP, even if the literature on the former does not overtly discuss it as

much. This study seeks to take such claims out of the realm of assumption/projection, to make them the study of empirical research.

## Institutional Power and Placement Validation

The second major theme of this chapter revolves around the issue of acquiescence to the say-so of the institution, in terms of student (writer) identity, in terms of the power of placement-as-message (where she *belongs*), often in terms of what good writing *is*. My argument is that BW placements that reinforce such tendencies to reify institutional say-so as absolute truth may be fostering unintended social consequences, which may make the decided plans of action less beneficial than alternative plans, therefore threatening their validity. What marks this discussion as distinct from the similar topic in Chapter Four is that there my focus was on matter of personal social identities; here my focus is on the dialectical nature of the social institution and those personal identities. So an issue like stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) would be more relevant in the present chapter because this is a phenomenon that occurs as a result of how an individual perceives herself *as* a member of a group that has a certain widely held social perception. Also, my aim here is to extrapolate from the individual lived experiences of my participants outside of the context of UWA in order to present concrete models of ways in which these social issues present themselves in day-to-day life. Further, the present section's concern with matters of institutional power—often at the price of individuals' powerlessness—marks the following analyses as critical in nature (Carspecken, 1996; Knight, 2000; Lynn, et al., 2006; Perry, 2008; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Znedek & Johnstone, 2008).

It should be no surprise that incoming college students often have a hard time

taking a stand against the say-so of the institution, after arguably being rewarded for years of acquiescence (or punished for resistance) in their K-12 schooling. A major criticism of DSP, as presented by the likes of Perry (2008) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999), involves the notion that it may be more difficult than pro-DSP authors think for a student to suddenly become free from long-standing institutional voices declaring what type of student they are, how good a writer they are, etc., in order to capitalize on that freedom of choice DSP aspires to. That is, it may not be as simple as Elbow's (2003) belief that in DSP, "control, agency, and decision making are returned entirely to the student" (p. 23).

In my first round of interviews, I began to formulate a similar criticism to Perry (2008) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999) that would strongly reflect statements such as,

> [W]e believe that students come to college experienced with the gaze of educational assessment—both large-scale and classroom-based—and that their self-assessments and self-images may be influenced by the internalization of others' evaluations of them. (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999, p. 218).

The term *gaze* here is taken from Foucault (1979), for whom "[t]he gaze ensures that individuals internalize and practice appropriate behaviors" (p. 203). A passage like this also sheds critical light on Harrington's (2005) notion that,

> Royer and Gilles' survey of students who elected to take the preparatory writing course showed that poor self-image was a compelling reason for that choice—but as Royer and Gilles' note, these students "saw themselves as poor readers and writers. In the past, we had done the seeing for them" ("Directed" 62). In these guided self-placement systems, students have the power to see themselves and

their courses, and to make their own decisions. (p. 24).

Authors such as Perry (2008) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999) raise the counterargument that this power to see themselves may be quite hard to tap into after a lifetime of others (particularly the institution of schooling and its representatives) doing the seeing/stamping for them.  I suggest that my data provides some concrete examples of this forces actually affecting individual students.

In what follows, I will present ways in which this reification of institutional concepts and identities came up in my interviews. I will begin by returning to Kelly, where I believe we can see how long-standing interpolated, re-inscribed *self*-perceptions may show that the freedom to have an unfiltered view one's own writing abilities and potential, after twelve years of schooling, may indeed be more complex than certain authors cited above (Elbow, 2008; Harrington, 2005; Royer & Gilles, 1998) seem to believe. Furthermore, I suggest that the greater the filtration of such views—via the voice of schooling as an institution—the more it may impact not only DSP decision, but traditional placement decisions as well, in that if a student believes she belongs in BW, she will be less likely to take charge of doing what she can to place out (discussed above).

**Kelly and the Gaze of the Institution**

I mentioned above that I suspected Kelly's view of her own literacy was heavily filtered by years of low placement and assessment. The following snippet from my first interview with Kelly, discussed also in Chapter Four, may help demonstrate the power of that invisible voice which is the residue of years of being placed, graded, categorized, and otherwise stamped as this or that type of student by the institution of schooling. Kelly

here reports her own views of herself as a writer, but as Schendel and O'Neill (1999) argued, "As with other assessment practices, self-assessment does not allow much room for resistance, for the gaze stretches far" (p. 207).

Josh: What did you think when you got the placement decision?

Kelly: I knew I was gonna be in English 100 [laughs].

J: You knew before hand? Why?

K: Cause I suck at writing.

J: OK [she laughs]. What was [the placement essay] like? Did you try on it?

K: [affirming] I tried.

J: But you knew you weren't gonna get in.

K: Yeah. [still kind of giggling]

J: What's, what's in that?

K: I just knew that I'd be in it because I've never been great at English or writing.

I've *always* been in lower English; I've *always* gotten bad grades in English.

I had also asked her about her math course, which brought a similar response, the complete converse:

J: What about math placement?

K: 125.

J: What is that?

K: That's where I was supposed to be: Calculus.

Kelly seemed to accept this *bad writer* identity without question, and even insisted that it was not the result of what people have told her—it was just true. She saw math placement the same way, in terms of its concrete nature.

In Chapter Four, I also mentioned that during our second interview, Kelly had just received her first grade in BW, and that it was a C. I would like to now re-examine that scene in terms of the current topic of institutional say-so (power) and student buy-in. I asked Kelly if she was even interested in doing better in BW, since it was hard to tell from talking with her, and the following discussion unfolded:

K: I'm interested in doing "better", but... / I'm *interested* in doing better, it's just... / If I can't do any better, I can't do any better.

J: Who's to decide if you can't do any better?

K: [chuckles, as if "obviously"] If I can't get a higher grade, then I can't get a higher grade. / I've been getting C's on my papers, prolly since middle school?

J: Right. [silence] So that's what I'm wondering about. What...? / Is? … / To what extent is *that* / causing you to keep getting C's, versus … / Look, I do not know you very well, but I think that a lot of people might be like, "Look, I've been told I was a C writer for so long that / I'm just a C writer. And that's what I do."

I am clearly pushing her here, perhaps even revealing too much of what I think is going on. However, part of my agenda and methodological approach allowed for this level of transparency, and since Kelly showed me that she had no problem disagreeing with my ideas, I felt that such exposure to my thoughts would be beneficial. Kelly answered,

K: No, I was never told I was a C writer...

J: But you get C's on your papers.

K: [annoyed] That's just what I *get*. I've had help with writing. . . . I was in special reading in my elementary and junior high, which was pretty much a reading and writing class, so I was *in* that for a few years, so just going off that I

know I'm not that great of a writer [chuckles].

The phrase "just going off that" truly taps into the heart of the present argument and theme. She said she was never told she was a C writer, but perhaps my use of the word *told* was not literal enough. What I meant by *told* was exactly what she said at the end: Kelly's evidence that she was a bad writer came from outside, not from within. Kelly took the fact that she *was* in special reading classes as enough evidence that she is "not that great of a writer," phrased in the present tense.

So Kelly is both a first generation college student and a former special reading student, both of which are groups that may be expected to be low achieving college writers—or at least, members of these groups may perceive others as having these perceptions. My concern for Kelly was always—from the time of our first interview—that her perception of herself as a bad writer was in need of serious revision, for it was only serving to limit her, and I speculated that it came not from a power to see herself, but from a powerlessness in the face of years of the institution's gaze (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999). If BW placement serves to reinforce this gaze for certain types of students (students from some social groups more than students from others), the validity of these decisions comes into question. As Cronbach (1988) put it, "*Tests that impinge on the rights and life chances of individuals are inherently disputable*" (p. 6, italics original).

**Do all the "Kelly"s belong in BW?** There is of course the possibility that Kelly, and students like her, just struggle with writing, and therefore genuinely belong in BW. (And in fact, I did conclude after speaking a number of times with Kelly that her particular placement was indeed the most profitable course of action for her, but again, that was based on concrete, contextualized, personal, and longitudinal premises.) My aim

here, however, is to show that there is just as surely room for counterhypotheses, which is what this study is meant to search for, particularly counterhypotheses that would not be likely to surface through most of the validation research methods I reviewed in Chapter Two. By the numbers, and even by what might surface on a satisfaction survey, I am confident that Kelly's placement would have a high level of validity. Yet, through my inquiry, my framework of critical, third-space phenomenology, certain plausible counter-arguments came to the surface, and they needed to be refuted before calling even this decision—one that might almost seem obviously correct—valid. As discussed in Chapter Four, I felt that my talks with Kelly, the data that emerged, did indeed refute these counter-arguments, and that is why I argued that her placement was valid. But this was an argument for one particular student, for one Kelly, as it were. The concern I raise here is for other students, those for whom the re-inscription of a low-achieving social identity as a writer (via institutional power) is not something the BW course itself can overcome, for this circumstance would make the validity of the decision disputable.

**Renee and the Institution**

Perry (2008) asserted that "CVI seeks to understand how power is exerted by the test design, test conditions, and decisions made based on the test scores, and how this power affects the particular groups and individuals assessed" (p. 152). As I said earlier, I see the present study, in part, as a working model of Perry's CVI. When I discussed Renee above, I mentioned that she tended to relinquish a lot of power to the institution's voice in matters of her intelligence, writing abilities, and student worth/identity, and I wondered how this tendency fit in with (either enabled or was enabled by) her placement. I now return to Renee's story in order to examine its larger social implications, as I said I

would in Chapter Four. Earlier on, I discussed the degree to which Renee saw her

placement as the answer to the question of whether she was a good or bad writer. What

she first told me, though, was that she did not think the decision was "totally correct"—so

there was some sign of resistance on her part, or at least an inkling that the infallibility of

the institution was not complete. I wondered if she thought her placement was incorrect

enough to go ahead and question it.

Josh: Did you talk to anybody before the class started?

Renee: About..?

J: I don't know.. did you, I mean… were you upset enough to be like, Hey, can I

take it again?

R: Nnno… cause I, like on my SATs I scored a 6, which is like… it's passing but

it's not good.  So I was like, welll. . . maybe, maybe I AM a bad writer… like,

Maybe I am.  So…. I don't know – I'm home schooled, so like I never actually

got… like I always got Bs.  As or Bs, but like my mom graded my papers, so…

like you never really got the official, like what does everyone else think about it.

Now, Renee was aware that her mother did have to adhere to certain standards. She told

me about yearly audits from department of education representatives who checked in on

the home schooling.  Still, these outside assessments—the SATs, the BW placement—had

Renee truly unsure of her worth as a student, as is apparent in her statement, "Maybe I

AM a bad writer."  The irony, perhaps tragedy, here is the notion that it is not the person

who read her writing, day after day, for twelve years who is able to give this answer; it is

not Renee who has a say; rather, it is the SATW, with which she interacted for less than

an hour, or a college placement test, and one person's opinion after reading that one short

essay. That is a lot of power in the hands of an institutional assessment, especially when one compares the samples sizes of the years she spent under her mother's tutelage versus the mere hours of data collected for the testing.

Here is another excerpt from an interview with Renee, also addressed in Chapter Four:

J: Another effect, you said is—and maybe we can talk more about this—you kind of come in saying to yourself, at least as a student—I'm not really a numbers person; I'm more of like a language person… then you get these TEST results… and it's like…

R: Yeah

J: So who's right?  Are YOU right?

R: (laughs)

J: You know yourself… for 18 years.  And you've had an hour with each of these—you know, who's right?

R: yeah.  So that's—I don't know... I guess I'll find out.

That last remark from Renee speaks volumes about the inscriptive power of the institution. Even in my phrasing of the question, I try to emphasize the absurdity that something like a single test can say more about who you are as a student (a person really) than what you yourself (or those who know and love you) know to be true.  To Renee, however, this notion of who she is—a math person or a language person, in this case—is uncertain until she *finds out* the answer.

J: Well, how do you think we fi—how do you find out if, if you're, I mean this is kind of silly, but if you're a numbers person or a language person?

Note that earlier I had asked, "And do you generally see yourself as more of an English person than a math person?" to which Renee had said, "Yeah. Definitely. Like I love to, I love to read." But now, Renee offered:

> R: Well, I have taken some tests, so I know that I'm more… I don't do well in math… Like I really, I really hate math.
>
> J: Yeah.
>
> R: Like I… I like English, I like common sense [less audible] like that is interesting to me. But… I guess if I do WELL in the class, if I get good grades, I if I know how to *write* then… that will… at least… it will sort of… solidify that I'm actually… am good at this.
>
> Sure… yeah. So it's something that we'll come to find out…

At this point, she seems to give total say to the institution, even though she had earlier noted her own love of reading as evidence that she was more of an "English person."

I do not think Renee's view of assessment is uncommon. Surely we all like to get good grades in a class, and getting those grades gives us more confidence that we do something well. The one line that goes beyond this notion, however, is "if I know how to *write*...." With this line, Renee implies that her grade is not a judgment call by the teacher or essay rater—as it was with her mother, perhaps; rather, doing well, getting good grades seems to *mean* that she can write, seems to be the actual answer to the question.

**Crucial questions to raise in validating the placement of students like Renee.**
If someone like Renee is going to let the power of the placement-as-message tell her the definitive answer to who she is—"Maybe I AM a bad writer"—then I suggest a validity

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inquiry needs to ask (a) what would a CW placement, with the message of "Maybe I am a GOOD writer," have done for her? Also, (b) what will be the lasting effects of her believing herself to now *be* a bad writer? Will this notion be reversible, and will these effects in the long run make the course placement "promise greater benefit to the student if the plan is carried out than if alternative plans are followed" (Messick, 1989b, p. 67)? If Renee sees writing ability as something fixed, something that exists outside of a context, then if she *is* a bad writer, is this a life-long malady, or can she become a good writer? In other words, what chances does someone like Renee have of turning around that institutional gaze, and will a BW placement help or hinder these changes?

**Can anything be done to counter these negative consequences?** Renee's telling of her experience raises the question of whether or not a program is unintentionally creating basic *writers* by placing students into BW. It surely seems to at least happen sometimes, as Renee helps show, and this tendency would clearly threaten the validity of the program's decisions by making such courses of action less beneficial than the alternative of CW placement (Messick, 1989b). On a broader social level, this consequence could threaten the validity of traditional placement in general, if such programs served, en masse, as a social force working to impose this remedial identity onto students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds at a rate higher than their mainstream counterparts. Yet, I do not claim to know what a placement program, or UWA's program in particular, can do with this information. In Renee's case, it seems that she might have benefited from a DSP procedure, especially if it gave her the chance to reflect upon her sense of herself as a writer, and encouraged her that she indeed did have a say in that identity. However, I would not advocate that UWA switch to a DSP

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procedure (nor that all placement should be DSP) because I think only Renee, Sam, and Twist would have likely benefited from it; furthermore, I think that someone like Kelly, in particular, would actually suffer from a reinforced notion that her identity as a bad writer was *self*-imposed.

Perhaps a vigilance regarding this power is a first step toward a solution, though. Perhaps the example that Renee presents can serve as all the more reason for a program—whether engaging in a validity inquiry or not—to impose upon itself the imperative of examining the implicit assumptions behind its practices, as Kane (1992, 2006, 2008) consistently argues, because the power of these decisions is just to great to do otherwise.

**Sam and Academic Praise: Can the Gaze have Positive Consequences?**

As I attempted to show in Chapter Four, Sam was an interesting outlier of sorts. She had been receiving institutional *praise* since she was young, and found herself shocked that she was suddenly one of *those* kids when she was placed in BW. Sam presents one more example of a way in which long-standing institutionalized perception (what Schendel and O'Neill, 1999, compared to Foucault's gaze) can play into the impact of BW placement. Although for Sam, her long-standing notion of herself as a good writer/good student arguably helped her resist her BW placement in what turned out to be a healthy way—since she ended up working harder than she otherwise would have in order to compile a portfolio worthy of CW exemption.

Sam at first told me she did not like how the placement was done, and I wanted to hear more:

Josh: Let me ask you this: do you not like [the placement procedure] because…

they placed you in Basic Writing, or… or…

Sam: um… well if I was in College Writing… I'm sure I'd be like fine with it. That's where I'd need to be?  But… now that like looking back at it, like… I'm mad cause like now I'm taking like an extra semester of writing class that I don't, that's I don't… technically need....  Like I'm looking at classes I'm taking next semester and like… I'm like BEHIND!   Um... I'm really like, for my major... I'm already like two classes behind…

A couple of interesting points emerge here. First, not unlike Kelly, Sam seems assured of "where she needs to be," as if that were a natural fact of the world (Stygall, 1994), not a situationally based judgment call. (When I asked Kelly about her math placement, she had told me, "125. . . That's where I was supposed to be: Calculus.") In the passage above, Sam said she was upset because she felt behind, which again is interesting. One can only *be* behind if there is another place one is *supposed* to be, which Sam feels there is.  She does not base this on UWA's writing curriculum in particular, but on a long standing institutionally sanctioned identity as a *good writer*.

S: I took, like, college classes in high school, like, all my writing, like I… *do* really good in writing.  So I was—it's a big shock to me when, like, I was in that class.

I emphasized the word *do* here because it shows how reified this concept of good writer is with Sam.  She does not claim that she *did* well in writing, or even that she has always *done* well.  She *does* well. This is an interesting reversal from most of the other participants who use these long-standing institutional stampings (including their BW placement, as we've seen) to resign themselves to being *bad writers*.  Because of this

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fixed notion, Sam took the BW placement as a great leap backwards.

> S: I've been like way above that since, like, elementary school.  So, like, going
> back down? Like downgrading? It was like, Whoa, like, what did I do wrong?  I
> haven't been there since like, first grade. So it was like, wow, like when I first got
> my results, it was like, "Are you serious?"

In terms of personal consequences, a clear counter-argument to her BW placement is that when a course (or placement into it) makes someone feel this way—that she is "going back down"; that she did something wrong; like she has regressed to first grade, and that her hard work since then has gotten her nowhere—it is highly plausible that these effects alone threaten the adequacy and appropriateness of the placement.  Again, if it hadn't been for the possibility of exemption from CW, Sam admitted,

> S: If we did not have this option [exemption], I prolly wouldn't care / that much /
> about my paper.
> J: So you're trying harder because you know...
> S: Yeah. I know if that was not an option, I would just / write whatever, and / not
> care as much.

For Sam, everything worked out in the end because she did get exemption from CW, proving to herself that she indeed was a strong writer, a good student. In that way, as I said above, Sam's somewhat rigid notion of her writing abilities (her buy-in to the institution's say-so) may have saved her, not only from an extra semester of writing— which would leave her feeling behind—but from a semester of BW where she coasted through and hurt not only her GPA and her potential to grow intellectually, but her self-perception as well.  I have several reasons, therefore, to conclude that the institutional

gaze may be a good thing for at least some students.

But I end this brief section on Sam feeling as if the broader lesson to be learned is somewhat darker. As this chapter focuses on critical social matters, with a keen eye toward the reproduction of social inequities, the lesson I am more tempted to take away from Sam's case is that the students who have been traditionally on the higher end of institutional approval are likely going to be fine, even if inappropriately placed into BW; but I do not see a correlating saving grace for the students traditionally on the lower end of that approval. The institutional gaze, as Schendel and O'Neill (1999) remind us, stretches far. But since that gaze keeps people in their place, Sam might help us see that for those who already benefit from their place, such gaze offers a safe-hold on privileges. This becomes a critical, social concern when one considers the greater likelihood that students from more educated families will enjoy those social roles more often than first generation college students; or when one considers the pure numerical data of the achievement gaps between white and non-white students in US schools. If Perry (2008) is correct in asserting that a validity inquiry must assume a critical lens in order to "cut through the institutional cunning that re-inscribes power relations through the use of educational assessment practices" (p. 164), and that CVI must "[seek] to understand the misuse of power through educational assessment practices" (p. 137), then we must not only view those who are kept afloat by the institution's gaze as evidence that the gaze is neutral in the end; rather, we must investigate the ways in which, for every student whose position of privilege is maintained by that gaze, countless others' positions of powerlessness remain fixed as a result. Further, I believe this resonates with Messick's (1989b) notion that "minimizing underpredictions... is also an important social value in

connection both with individual equity and with parity for minority and disadvantaged groups (pp. 79-80).

I do not mean to suggest that all white middle class children come to college with such positive perceptions of themselves, nor that non-white, lower SES students come to college without a Sam-like confidence. The issue here is not about the individuals, but about the likelihood; it is about the fact that long-standing success is more likely to come along with the privileges of the social mainstream. The argument here echoes what validity theorists such as Cronbach (1988) and compositionists such as Perry (2008) and Huot and Williamson (1997) argue—that the great power of those who control educational assessments comes with very real responsibility.

**Section Summary**

This second major theme of Chapter five—the role of institutional power in placement validation—was my most direct attempt at putting the aims of Perry's (2008) CVI to work. If placement programs are to take validation seriously, they must consider the ways in which the (often subtle) effects of institutional power (or say-so, or gaze) are at work within their efforts. There may be cases where this gaze actually helps individual students, as with Sam; however, it become much harder to argue that allowing such power to operate within composition placement (or educational assessment more broadly) is not deleterious on a wider social level. If we view such institutional power as capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), it may be easier to understand why, even though it may benefit a privileged few, it can cause even greater harm to a powerless mass. That is, as with any capital, the more one has, the more one can accrue; whereas, the less one has, the more difficult it becomes to amass any. Therefore, part of a critical

validation program would entail a vigilance about the ways in which certain cultural capitals are, implicitly, guiding the placement decisions.

The issues raised in this section are complex and frustrating to be sure. An attempt to derive definitive answers is likely to do little justice to that complexity. Therefore, as I said above, my study suggests that the most effective and appropriate actions a program can take are those that have been stated throughout the validity theory literacy for quite some time (e.g., Crooks & Kane, 1996; Kane, 1992, 2001, 2006, 2008; Messick, 1989b; Moss, 1994, 1996, 1998a); namely, that those involved in validating placement programs must seek to be vigilant for any implicit assumptions that serve implicitly to guide their efforts. As Kane, 1992, said, "One of the main reasons for stating the argument clearly and for examining the inferences in some detail is to identify the assumptions being made" (p. 528). However, Moss (1996) laments that while the notion of endless, recursive efforts to root out implicit assumptions and values that underpin our decisions, this ideas remains "one that we have rarely, if ever, explored in practice" (p. 20). This study is an attempt to demonstrate how such considerations could come into play through empirical inquiry, if that inquiry assumes a critical stance and a truly qualitative, phenomenological framework.

## Chapter Five Summary

This chapter attempted to focus less on the evaluation of each individual's BW placement and more on the broader picture of these types of placements, both on what any placement program might learn from the specific individual I studied, and on the possible impact on a larger social level of the consequences my participants lived through. I began with a concrete finding from my UWA participants, noting how often

there seemed to be a mismatch between the messages sent from the placement program

and the messages received by these individuals. My argument was that this issue

presented wrinkles in the validity of placements not only on individual level but more

broadly as well. That is, to the extent that the types of miscommunication I report are

fairly typical, placement programs everywhere might be unintentionally placing better

message-receivers higher than poorer ones, which, on a technical level, may introduce

construct-irrelevant variance into such placement decisions, unless the courses in a

particular curriculum do aim to improve and develop this particular ability; on a social

level, depending upon how the ability to receive institutional messages interplays with

student background (SES, level of family education, etc.), such tendencies may be

serving to reinforce the very types of inequities that led to certain students' difficulty in

receiving the program's messages in the first place. This would be the very definition of

Messick's (1989b) unintended negative social consequences due to construct-irrelevant

variance, the "problem of assuring that adverse social consequences of testing to not

derive from any sources of invalidity, such as construct-irrelevant test or criterion

variance" (p. 74). My attempt here was to present concrete instances of how such theory

might appear in day-to-day assessment/placement practice.

In the second section, I took influence from Schendel and O'Neill's (1999) use of

Foucault's *gaze* as a way of understanding how long-standing interpolated notions of self

might appear to originate from a power to see oneself clearly (Elbow, 2003; Royer &

Gilles, 1998), but often stem from a powerlessness to resist that institutional gaze. Kelly

was a primary example of someone who—although her particular situation showed what

I claim to be a high level of placement validity (see Chapter Four)—had a tremendous

buy-in to the say-so of the institution, thought she did not realize it ("No, I was never told I was a C writer. . . That's just what I *get*"). Renee also demonstrated a high level buy-in to "the official, like, what does everyone else think" as the *true* statement of her worth as a writer—even her identity as either a math person or an English person. Renee serves as an example of someone who knows who she is (in this type of setting) only through that gaze of the institution; therefore, her story may hold lessons for those in charge of placement about the power they have to unintentionally create the very types of traits that they wish to simply diagnose and then help.

Finally, Sam demonstrated that sometimes the gaze of the institution can be stronger than a particular placement decision. Because the placement program at UWA allowed students to submit a portfolio of BW coursework that could potentially place them out of CW, Sam was able to use her long-standing notion of herself as someone who "does good in writing" to help gather the motivation to try her hardest on her BW papers in order to gain exemption from CW. Several lessons might be gleaned from a student like Sam. She might represent just how far that gaze can stretch (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999), to the point where even something as powerful as college composition placement cannot quite shake it; and for Sam, this may have indeed been a type of invisible helping hand. But I argued that this raises a larger question about students for whom a long-standing social identity of bad student (whether as an individual, or as a member of a marginalized social group) might more serve as a invisible had holding them down. My suggestion for what can be done about such deleterious consequences referred back to the validity theory literature, where authors for years have been arguing that a primary step in validating any assessment procedure is an extensive effort—often recursive series of

efforts—to root out possible implicit assumptions that underlie the inferences drawn and

decisions made based the assessment data.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

**Concluding Remarks**

I began this dissertation with the notion that validity—in this case, the validation of college composition placement—must be seen as a matter of responsibility, rather than as a matter of accountability (Huot, 2002; Huot & Williamson, 1997; Noddings, 2007). When seen as a matter of accountability, my concern is that placement validity assumes the goal of placating an outside authority with enough evidence that a program is going its job well; but with no reason to go beyond such evidence, no reason to look for weak chains of reasoning within the argument, for plausible rival hypotheses, no reason to cause oneself more trouble than is needed to please the given audience to which one is accountable. I argued, though, that both the letter and spirit of current validity theory demands that those who validate placement programs must indeed seek out such possible trouble as part of that process, a notion that can be seen in the literature of validity theory when it talks about raising and refuting rival hypotheses as a fundamental part of validation (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Messick, 1989b; Mislevy, 2007; Moss, 1996, 1998; Shepard, 1993). This is the point at which validity must be seen as a matter of ethics and social *responsibility*, not a matter of accountability, of proving to an outside reviewer that a placement program is doing a sufficient job.

In my study, I hoped to put Perry's (2008) notion of critical validity inquiry (CVI) into practice as a way of seeking out the type of trouble that, if left undiscovered, could be having adverse social consequences—both on a personal and societal level—despite the best intentions of the placement program. I aimed to complicate the placement

decisions for my participants here, to go looking for possible lurking trouble. This aim, I argued, falls well in line with the notion of validity as a rhetorical argument (e.g., Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 1992, 2006; Shepard, 1993) in which the stronger the rival hypotheses raised and refuted, the stronger the overall argument.

My aim in the study was two-fold: first, I sought to provide UWA's placement program itself with information gleaned from this critical, qualitative investigation, so that the individuals in charge might have new insights to add into their ongoing improvement; second, I sought to take the issues and themes that arose from my inquiry and use them as examples of matters that can and do come up, matters that do complicate that notion of composition placement. I begin this final chapter with a series of concluding remarks, along with some concrete suggestions, based on my finding in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Miscommunication**

A major theme of Chapter Five involved the miscommunication between UWA's placement program and the incoming students. These findings made me questions statements such as **"**[DSP] communicated the positive message to students that we respected their judgment" (Blakesley, 2002, p. 21) because my interviews clearly showed that while a program can clearly state the messages it believes it sent, it is much more dangerous to assume what messages its incoming students received. Furthermore, these findings showed the difficulty and complexity involved in achieving the goal of statements like, "The orientation talks with students and printed program materials should communicate clearly those course goals and expectations whether they be up to date with current writing pedagogy or not" (Reynolds, 2003, p. 94). Yes, programs (through their

materials or whatever other means) should communicate clearly to students, but I hoped to show that this is going to be a difficult process, one that needs to be investigated through qualitative, third-space research in order for the program learn to the extent to which this intention is being reached. If this type of research shows that students are indeed not receiving the intended messages, such program have the responsibility to find ways to communicate more clearly with the students, or else I have argued that the validity of the placement program is threatened.

As a further point of interest from my study, I realized that after reviewing all of my conversations with participants, these students were all much more likely to answer a question that they did not understand than to ask me for clarification. In fact, I could find no instance of a participant asking me what I had meant by a question in any of my interviews; yet there were many instances where it became clear that the question a participant was discussing was quite different from the one I had asked (I presented an example from Lynn above). I think it is worth noting that these particular students—all placed in BW—shared a common tendency to act as if they understood a message/communication rather than make sure that they first understood it. This tendency may put more burden on a program wishing to clearly communicate its goals to such students, since the program may receive little indication that messages were misunderstood unless it goes looking for that information. Again, though, in order to live up to the theoretical and social demands of validation, such (possibly unpleasant) information must be honestly, courageously sought.

I realize that UWA's placement program is currently working on ways to better help its students received the program's intended messages; and I hope that some of the

insights presented here, via the participants' lived experience, can help such matters.

**Stigmatized Social Identities on Campus**

I went into this study prepared to investigate the layers of social stigma that a UWA student must navigate in order to succeed in BW. I think it is a positive (non-)finding that this topic hardly ever came up, even when I tried to look for it. BW students at UWA do not seem to carry a social stigma; a conclusion I draw from the direct experiences of my participants, as well as from discussion their perceptions of how others—in their classes, on campus—seemed to feel about *being basic writers*.

But I suggest that, even though I found little of this marginalization in the culture of the UWA campus, this was a necessary component of the present inquiry. I further suggest that type of investigation that should (and can) be done regularly on any campus with different levels of composition courses. This issue has too many potentially harmful consequences to leave it to the realm of assumption. Furthermore, this type of stigmatized social identity is likely going to exist as part of the underlife (Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995) of the classroom and campus, a further reason why a third-space inquiry is key to this line of research.

One possible complicating factor,, however, in this part of my inquiry was the fact that nearly none of my participants had many friends in CW. Sam was the notable exception. Some participants reported that they simply did not know which composition course, if any, most of their friends were taking. Some seemed to have more friends in BW. Further investigation might be done on this topic because perhaps there is a stigma within the campus culture at UWA that I simply missed; and perhaps the reason why none of my participants seemed to feel this stigma was because it had been a larger—not

smaller—force in helping to settle them into social groups.  But again, further study would be needed before any such claims could be asserted or refuted.

**Finishing the Placement Procedure**

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, if there is any problem with the placement procedure itself at UWA, I suggested that it involves how the procedure is completed; that is, how the BW instructors use that first-week essay to help ensure that the students have not been inappropriately placed. The measures to help to remedy this seem fairly concrete. First, it seems that the instructors need a clear understanding of the role that this essay plays—not just in their individual sections, but in the validity and reliability of the UWA placement program as a whole. If they choose to devalue this exercise, they need to know that this decision affects the entire program's validity. Second, but highly related, is a suggestion that the teachers need a greater level of buy-in, that they may need to see and believe in the importance of this procedure, for I saw that a least some of the BW instructors do not value this essay as much as the program might hope or believe.

Along these lines, I suggest that the program make attempts to better communicate to the students themselves that their placement is not 100% finished until the BW instructor personally evaluates a piece of their writing. This awareness may lower some resistance as it ensures some students that the placement decision was not made in haste or done unfairly, and that efforts are still being made to ensure the the students was not misplaced. Further, this communication might give the student more motivation to capitalize on this last opportunity to place into CW, if that is where she thinks she should be.

**ENG 100 Portfolio**

Along the same lines, I wonder if the benefits Sam experienced from the ENG 100 portfolio option could be extended more broadly, to students who do not receive A's on every BW paper. The potential trouble with the process now is that if a student starts doing poorly, he might just give up, since he will realize that exemption from CW is no longer an option, which may in turn hurt his chances of putting in the type of effort into BW that will ensure he receive the educational experience the program wishes for him. I wonder if the specific course grade should even be relevant if the student is able to compile a portfolio of work that the WPA considers worthy of exemption from CW. Whatever may or may not be changed logistically, it would be nice to see more students benefit from the ENG portfolio the way Sam did.

**Essay Exam Prompts**

Another conclusion I draw from these interviews regards the essay prompts used for UWA's placement exam (Appendix D below). Both John and Lynn felt somewhat alienated by the particular literacy these prompts seemed to value—the literacies that these prompts suggested were key to successful writing at UWA. In reading them myself, I would agree that these prompts project a type of taste, if you will, that I do not think is necessary to succeed in UWA's composition curriculum, but I do not think this is done intentionally. If it is unintentional, but students are feeling alienated by that particular sensibility, this alienation might introduce some more possible construct-irrelevant variance into the placement decision.

I wonder if the program could utilize digital technology use more than two prompt options. Since the prompts are available online, I wonder if the students could be given a

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variety of prompts to choose from. In terms of reliability issues, the fact that UWA's

placement program accepts portfolios *or* prompted essays shows that the placement

method does not currently rely on the paper topics all being identical, so presenting more

topics should not be a problem in that sense. (I will develop this suggestion in greater

detail below.)

**BW Teachers**

Finally, as noted in Chapter Four, perhaps the most concrete, yet widely

applicable, conclusion I can draw regards the role of teachers in BW. Granted, good

teaching is more likely an art than a precise science, and what is more, even the notion of

*good teaching* is somewhat of a reified construct because it implies that there is such

thing as good teaching outside of a teacher-student connection, which there may or may

not be. So this issue is not easily resolved because there may be no way to predict how

good a teacher will be, both because this will in part depend upon individual student

connection, and also because good teaching may be too abstract a construct to adequately

predict (in terms of whom to hire or whom to assign BW sections to). However, there

must be ways to give a program the best change of having the best BW teachers—or at

least of trying to ensure that it does not have outright bad teachers, by which I mean, for

the most part, teachers who do not want to be teaching BW, who are doing it because

there was no other courses available, or because they are low-ranking and had no choice,

etc.

The two clear success stories in this study—Lynn and John—both had teachers

who truly believed in them, and in some deep ways, these teachers helped the students

believe in themselves too. One teacher was highly experienced, but the other was quite

new—it was his very first composition course. So experience alone was not the key factor. In speaking with the teachers casually (though this was not part of my study and is therefore purely anecdotal) I think the difference may stem from that sense of belief in the students. I felt very different levels in this sense of belief in the students even in my brief hallway interactions with the teachers when I went to pitch my study to their classes. In particular, I remember feeling inspired by the way John's teacher spoke about BW students; and I recall feeling quite frustrated by the way Twist's teacher criticized them for not having critical thinking skills. Further research would need to be done to draw this connection between belief in BW students and student success, but my brief interactions suggest to me that this quality may be one key factor in distinguishing good from bad BW teachers.

Whether this information can help a program place more effective teachers in BW courses, or whether simply being aware of this matter (of making genuine attempts) is enough, I hope that the information presented here at least serves as some concrete data that BW courses must not be staffed carelessly, and that if they are, this decision presents a threat to the validity of the placement program, because the consequences of the ensuing course are an integral part of the quality of the placement decisions.

**Identity and the Invisible Hand**

Chapter Five also focused on what Schendel and O'Neill (1999), via Foucault, call the gaze of the institution. There I attempted to provide empirical support for such theory, demonstrating ways in which these participants (as I argued in Chapter Four) were guided by inscripted and re-inscripted notions of themselves as writers and students. This is the type of identity-stamping that DSP hopes to eradicate by giving students the opportunity

to take total control and place themselves where they would be be served. But Perry (2008) helped show that all placements—from the most traditional of the traditional placement model to the most (seemingly) student-driven DSP—both drive and are driven by long-standing interpolated, institutionally sanctioned notions of self; that simply giving the student a free choice does not suddenly undo the power of his hegemonic identity narrative (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). And I hope that my study served to provide concrete instances of how such forces can be displayed in the discourse of real individuals as they talk about their experiences with their BW placement.

While scholars like Elbow (2003) and Royer and Gilles (1998) believe such forces can be fairly simply overcome, Perry (2008) and Schendel and O'Neill (1999) show us that that gaze will most likely always there, no matter who is actually performing the assessment. But in the final section of this chapter (and this dissertation), I offer an attempt at a placement model that hopes to limit the forces of hegemonic reproduction of marginalized identity, through the use of interaction (between the student and the institution via current technology) and transparency of intention.

**Limitations of the Study**

**Interview consistency.** Interview consistency is a complex issue for a study like the one I presented here. I do see that there are times when a certain topic came up (the first-week essay, for example) with some participants but not with all others, and that my ability to analyze and draw conclusions based on such matters may be limited by the fact that I did not get everyone's take on the issue. However, an overly structured approach to these interviews—with the goal of making sure that all participants weighed in on all topics—would have likely ensured that some of these topics would not have come up at

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all. That is, some of these topics came up naturally out of dialogue with the participants, not out of my own pre-planning, which I argue is part of the power of the interviewing methodology, as described in Chapter Three. This freedom of discourse was essential to my ability to come across topics that I had not even hypothesized ahead of time; to do otherwise would have greatly limited the ability of this study to meet its aims.

More follow-up, as opposed to more a structured interviewing method, is probably the best solution to this matter of inconsistency between participant interviews. But this is a troublesome matter as well. Not all of the participants stayed in touch with me as the semester went on. This is going to happen with any qualitative study, but the fact that my population consisted of students who are traditionally less prepared for the demands of school writing may mean that they will be more likely to be less *plugged-in* to my study as well. Also, some of these students are going to be failing and transferring—yet these are students whose voices are critical to heed (Messick, 1989b). So while this particular population may prove difficult in terms of retention in the study, this only means to me that greater efforts must be taken to keep their voices alive. This leads to my next limitation.

**More third-space positionality.** As much as I tried, the fact is that I was likely to be seen as more of an institutional representative (a school-person) than a fellow student or just a friend. I remain convinced, however, that the data gatherable in that third-space is crucial to a thorough validity inquiry. The issues of campus stigma, of the social positioning of BW students, the underlife of the campus, and even retention of less traditionally plugged-in students as participants, may require more third-space positionality than I was able to achieve.

To this end, I suggest that future studies with similar goals seek to employ the assistance of more campus insiders, whether they be teaching assistants, resident advisors, student advisors—or even other community members with less institutionally sanctioned roles.  I think, for example, that a dorm RA or a peer advisor may be able to investigate student lived experience—of both the BW course and the identity of the basic writer on a particular campus—in ways that no school person could. Moreover, it would seem to me a great opportunity for an teaching assistant—in psychology, education, or any social science student—to gain the experience of helping out a real life research project, in addition to the data that might be available to such individual, yet hidden from the school people.

### Interactive Placement Model (IPM)

From both the research done to set up the present study, and from lessons learned through  participant interviews and their analysis, I want to end this dissertation with a concrete proposal for a placement model that I think might be able to take the best parts of the different models seen here, while avoiding some of the pitfall that each one inevitably presents. No placement model will be perfect, and so I am sure that this model will have problems, but as I argued in Chapter One, realizing that no assessment/validation will be perfect does not free us from the ethical responsibility to continually strive to improve upon what we have.

I call this model an Interactive Placement Model (IPM) because it attempts to utilize interactive digital technology in order to make placement a more open conversation between the school and the individual, rather than a blanket statement from either—that is, rather than the school stating where the individual belongs, or the

individual stating where she belongs (as in DSP models). Since IPM seeks to be

interactive, my hope is that the multiple sources of evidence meant to help guide

placement decisions would benefit both those students who may be better suited to DSP

(students like Renee, Sam, and Twist), and that it would create the opportunity for more

complex and contextualized examination of writing abilities for those students in danger

of choosing a course based upon interpolations the institutionalized gaze (Schendel &

O'Neill, 1999), students like Kelly and perhaps Dawn.

IPM has four parts, which do not have to come in any certain order, but for UWA,

I will suggest the following,, all to be explained in detail below:

- Part 1: Profile Based upon Test Scores

- Part 2: Have a Professor Read Your Writing

- Part 3: Ask a Current Student for Advice

- Part 4: Look at Course Materials

**Part 1: Profile Based upon Test Scores**

In order to register for English composition, the student would come to a webpage

that explains that there are three possible composition placements: BW, CW, or

exemption from both (I will keep this specific to UWA). Step 1 of IPM suggests that the

student enter any test scores he has into the page (there will be slots for SAT, ECT, AP,

TOEFL, etc.), whereupon he can see the percentages of where students will similar score

profiles have been placed (or which courses they have chosen/taken) over the past few

years. So, he can enter whatever score he chooses, and he will see that, for instance, 65%

of people with a similar score profile took BW, and 35% took CW.  This should give him

some sense, at a purely numerical level, of where students somewhat like him tend to go

in the composition curriculum. Then, if he wants to see how the students did in each course, clicking a link will show him what percentage of these students earned A's, B's, and C's in each course

This first step allows the student to gain an overview of strictly numerical evidence that he might best be served in either BW or CW, but it does not imply which course he *should* take or where he belongs. This last statement would have to be made as clear as possible for IPM to be truly interactive. As my study has shown, clarity of message is not the easiest thing to achieve, so it will take conscientious effort.

At this point in the placement procedure, the webpage has only provided the information the student has asked for at any time. That is, when he inputs his scores, he will only see the breakdown of which course similar scoring students took. If the student wants to then see the breakdown of course grades, he chooses to see that information. The idea here is that the student is given the information he asks for, rather than a potential bombarding of information which he may not know how to sift through. The more information the student wants, the more he can access through hot links.

As a final element of Part 1, the instructions on the page could encourage the student to see where students with *slightly different* scores had been placed, and their grades in those classes. If he received a 410 on his SATV, but thinks this is lower than his abilities, he can enter 430, or 500, just to see what students with this score (but otherwise with scores just like his) ended up. This is important because some students (rightly) do not consider their scores to be 100% accurate representations of who they are, and IPM should encourage flexibility. As a brief example, I once had a student who scored a 590 on his SATV at a college where a 600 would exempted him from CW. The semester was

a disaster with this student (and he even had a negative impact on other students in the class) because he believed that if he had only scored 10 points higher, he would have been exempt, and so he really should not have to take the course. Clearly, the fault lay with the roughshod placement procedure.  But this same student, using IPM, could say to himself, "Well, I really could have scored a 600.  Let me see where that would have placed me." This is a key benefit if an interactive model.

Overall, Part 1 will try to *use* a scoring profile created by the student, while at the same time trying to emphasize that the student is not equal to his scores in any absolute sense. As I stated above, IPM tries to limit the power of the institutional gaze through the use of both interaction and transparency of intention. By showing the student that scores and placement (where she *belongs*) are inexact and fluid—again, not just saying this, but *treating* them that way—I hope that IPM can reach a level of transparency of intention that might also serve to at least ease some of the power of that gaze, that interpolation of institutionally sanctioned inscriptions.

**Part 2: Have a Professor Read Your Writing**

For those students who want more than just the information from Part 1 before selecting a course, Part 2 encourages them to send in writing to be read by a professor who teaches BW and/or CW. This part is essentially what UWA already does. Student could either choose to submit a portfolio of high school work (required if they wish to place out of CW altogether), or they could take a timed-essay online; or perhaps they could send in a final paper draft of a high school paper, since this sample might be a highly authentic representation of their potential to succeed in a writing course. At this point, the readers could either gather for placement sessions as they already do; or the

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writing could be sent to a reader via email (or placed on a webpage) where an expert

reader could assess it immediately.  Each has its benefits. Placement sessions allow for

norming and more guidance; but they also have costs that posting the samples on a

message board and having them assessed on a first come, first served basis would not.

**IPM Prompts.** Another possible benefit of Part 2 of IPM would be that, since this

whole model attempts to use current interactive technology, there would be no reason to

have only two prompts. I foresee a page where the student could be given a list of

subjects, select those of interest, and be given a choice of prompts for each.  There is no

reason why everyone would have to write about the same prompt. As I argued above,

anyone using a portfolio system must recognize that the notion that the topics or prompts

must all be the same is no longer applicable to a valid placement procedure.

While it would take some work to gather good prompts for all the different

subjects, once they were gathered, they could be used for a potentially long time.  Or,

they could be continually added to and revised, so that any student can chose a prompt

that will tap into her strongest writing abilities, rather than favoring certain students'

interests (or types of literacies) over others (as experienced by Lynn and John).

Depending upon how the writings are read—whether posted online and placed

one at a time, or read during placement sessions—the student could be informed online

about where her reader(s), in their expert opinion, believed she would best be served,

either BW or CW. Now the student has both the numerical breakdown of her scoring

profile and the opinion of a professor (though based on a small sample) to guide her

placement decision.

At this point, she is still not locked into a course, and my hope is that this will cut

down on the potential for her to perceive that the placement was unfair or done badly (e.g., Sam, Renee, Dawn, Twist), which could then lead to resistance, thereby hurting the student's chances of fully benefiting from the course. Since she was first given a purely numerical sense of where similar student are placed and how well they succeed (in terms of grades) and then given a professional opinion about which course would be suit her, my hope is that there will be less resistance to BW placement (since it will ultimately be her decision), and less unwarranted acquiescence as well (e.g., Kelly, Ashley).

**Part 3: Ask a Current Student for Advice**

In order to add a phenomenological component to this model, to tap into the underlife of the BW classroom and even the campus at UWA, to provide information about *being in* the course that no school-person could genuinely know, Part 3 will provide contact information for a student who has taken one or both of the composition courses. This way, the student can speak to a recent student (either on the webpage itself, or perhaps through non-institutional means, such as *Facebook* or other more third-space options) about what it is like to be in the course, on this specific college campus. As my study showed, there seemed to be little stigma at UWA toward Basic Writers. But this may not be the case on other campuses, and part of the validity of a placement decision must weigh this in, for even if the curriculum itself is better first for a particular student, if he is made to feel he must assume a certain social identity at a certain school, the placement may not be the most appropriate and profitable one for him. Again, though, this is information that the school-people really do not have, and arguably cannot have, even though it may be key information to help guide a valid placement decision.

**Part 4: Look at Course Materials**

  This last part of the IPM model would give a student, still unsure of which is the best course to take, information about the courses themselves, including links to course syllabi, teacher webpages, and even sample course assignments and papers. I think that for a student who truly wants the most information possible before making the choice, this type of information could be invaluable. At the same time, for a student who is not yet ready for this information, it could be overwhelming, perhaps hindering her from knowing which information to use and which to de-prioritize. The interactive part of IPM recognizes that this same information—while crucial to one student—could be unnecessary, potentially overwhelming, to a student who does not want it (or is not ready for it). This is why I suggest the use of interactive technology to give the student just what she needs, when she needs it, rather than an inundation which she will almost never be able to navigate.

**Validation and IPM**

  Ongoing validation should also be a part of IPM (potentially worthy of calling it Part 5), not simply done only for an outside evaluator. IPM seeks first to be ethically and socially responsible to the students and to wider society, and then (as a *result* of such responsibility) to be accountable to outside authority. Here is how I foresee IPM validation as a part of the model: first, the ongoing collection of data for Part 1 is essentially the collecting of validity evidence equal to what many of the studies in the first section Chapter Two reported. Since this database must be up-kept in order to keep IPM running, these numbers could be enough criterion-related validity evidence of IPM's effectiveness for most outside authorities. This would only be one step, though, in the

ongoing validation of IPM.

Part 3 of IPM, where the students have a type of third space forum to speak as individuals about the course and course placement, outside of the view of school-people, can serve as an ongoing type of qualitative validation. While the actual information of these communications should belong only to the students, the type of critical reflection that this encourages might make for more readily available data from students about both their perceptions of the placement program, and their perception of *others' perceptions* of it; and I will suggest studies such as the one I present here to tap into that data. Regular undertaking of such studies would provide the kind of validity evidence that most DSP articles—which mentioned the importance of such student perceptions, but only on anecdotal levels—seemed to be missing; the qualitative end of what I called the polarization of validity evidence in Chapter Two.

**Flexibility of IPM in Different Contexts**

Depending upon the college, these four steps do not have to come in any particular order; and they may not even all be needed. For example, a school that currently uses only test scores to place students might not have the resources to offer what I have called Part 2, "Have a Professor Read Your Writing." If this simply cannot be done, I still argue that the other three parts of IPM: the score profile information, the chance to communicate with recent students, and the availability of course syllabi and sample course papers, are a better alternative than decisions made purely via *cut score*. But with that said, a pilot study might show that even for larger schools, if a small enough percentage of students  want this step that, reading their writing upon request could actually be feasible.

**Other Potential Benefits of IPM**

As for other benefits, the longer IPM runs, the more precise the information in Part 1 will become, since the database will be the much larger. Also, over time, the program will have a much better time foreseeing what percentage of students are likely to want their writing samples read by professors, which will be helpful in deciding the types of resources, including the amount of staff, are needed. Further, since so much of the labor with this model is on the front end, the only part that requires regular work from the faculty once the IPM is up and running is Part 2. So, depending upon how many students partake in this component, IPM could be quite inexpensive once up and running.

**Limitations: Is IPM just DSP?**

It is arguable that IPM is just DSP with more bells and whistles, but I suggest there are some key differences: First, ongoing validation is part of the model, which clearly distinguishes it from most DSP programs (Gere, et al., 2010; Neal & Huot, 2003; Perry, 2008), and this includes both quantitative lines of evidence (from Part 1), and substantiated qualitative lines of evidence—both of which DSP literature to date has lacked (see Chapter Two). Also, while DSP programs differ greatly in the amount of information they provide about their composition curriculum, Part 2 of IPM gives students the opportunity to see where a teacher from this particular school would suggest they be placed, which is something most DSP procedures do not provide. So while there are elements of DSP—namely, that the student ultimately chooses the course—I argue that IPM at least seeks to be a hybrid of the most effective elements of traditional and directed self-placement through its different parts and use of interactive technology.

**Problems with Part 1, the score profile.** Another potential limitation is that one can argue that using scores at all is just a way of reinforcing the very institutional gaze (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999) that I have been arguing against. This situation is possible. My best response is that this part of the model is only one part in what intends to be a dialogical process, and that the webpage needs to clearly emphasize the interactive part of IPM (and it must seek empirical evidence that students are indeed receiving this message). Yes, some students may just go with what the numbers say, and they might even be the very people like Kelly, the ones most in danger of the power of that reinforced gaze; but there is no way of knowing this yet. Since ongoing validation is part of IPM, my hope is that the program could suss this out (through the type of study presented here) and make informed adjustments. A pilot study of IPM could provide valuable information about the percentage of student who only look at Part 1 (even those who only look at the percentages of where the similar students have been placed, not at their grades) and just go with that. At this point, qualitative interviews could be effective in assessing why students would stop there and not maximize the interactive capabilities of the model.

## Conclusions

Considering the information gathered from this study, and the theoretical and methodological arguments behind it, I suggest that the implementation of IPM is a course of action that merits consideration. For current DSP programs, it would add more guidance and outside evaluation for students who do want it, and it would demand more rigorous validation on both quantitative and qualitative levels. For programs that currently use only test scores, even if they choose to leave out Part 2 (Have a Professor

Read Your Writing), the remaining parts of IPM could help decrease some students' sense of powerlessness in the face of institutional declarations of their abilities, which can either lead to resentment and resistance (which hurt the student's profitability in BW) or to the re-inscription of long-standing negative social identities via the gaze of the institution. Finally, for programs that currently read student writing (through any procedure), IPM could help by (a) triangulating the evidence for the student, so she feels less *placed*, if that is something she responds badly to; (b) by suggesting that programs do move to an expert-reader model for the assessment of such placement materials, if they currently use other methods, such as holistic or analytic scoring; (c) by giving incoming students a sense of what possible social, personal effects their placement might have (via Part 3, Talk to a Recent Student); and even (4) by cutting down on the number of writing that need to be read, which could both increase the effectiveness of each one, and potentially cut costs that might go to other endeavors, perhaps the ongoing validation of IPM.

Furthermore, I hope that the interactive nature of IPM can itself create a more clear line of communication between the placement program and the incoming students. This too will need to be the subject of real inquiry, but the fact that part of the model has students click on links only when they want that information puts them in the position of inquirers, seeking information.

Finally, one thing clear from nearly every participant was at least some level of resistance to being placed in BW. While this resistance sometimes went down over the course of the semester (e.g., Lynn, Sam, Renee), it still did present a stumbling block that BW would have to overcome, making the course even more difficult for all involved. I

hope that when students feel involved in a dialogue regarding their placement, the factors

that cause such resistance can be addressed as part of the process of coming to the

placement decision, rather than surfacing as resentment after the decision is made by the

institution, or being treated as if the these factors must no longer exist since the burden of

the decision-making (Perry, 2008) was shifted entirely over to the student herself.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent for Participants
[on letterhead]

Project: Effects and effectiveness of Basic Writing placement at IUP

Principal investigator: Josh Lederman, doctoral student in Composition & TESOL.  Co-Investigator: Dr. Michael M. Williamson, professor of English, IUP.

This study will attempt to examine whether or not the decisions made to place students into Basic Writing (ENGL 100) at IUP are the best possible decisions for all involved.  In order to study this, we hope to look at the experiences that Basic Writing students go through over the course of the semester by conducting interviews, reading some written work, and observing an occasional class.  We hope to build a relationship with participants that will help open up communication about feelings and attitudes toward the course, and placement into the course, and how this placement decision impacts their schooling and college life in general over the course of the semester.  We are looking for all effects this placement might have, because we want to assess whether or not the placement decisions our program makes are indeed the right decisions.

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator, and only he will have access the to information involved.  Any written work shared with the principal investigator will also be kept private and not shared with anyone else.  In the study write-up, no real names will be used.

There is very little risk involved in participating in this study.  Anything you tell the investigator will be completely confidential, and no one's real name will be used.  At any time, participants may withdraw from the study, either by informing the interviewer to turn off the recorder, at which point we will end the session, and all information you have provided will be destroyed.; or by contacting either investigator (contact information listed below) and informing him that you wish to be removed from the study, at which point, again, all information you have provided will be destroyed.

While the risk is minimal, the potential benefits include: the chance to voice your thoughts and opinions, honestly and confidentially, about your experiences in ENGL 100; the opportunity to be a part of positive change in the way students are placed into writing classes, along with the chance to reveal your ideas about aspects of this placement decision that teachers or administrator may not have realized.  The investigators also believe that having the opportunity to talk about your writing classes, and college experience in general, is a great way to take more control over this experience and to learn more about what you want from your education, what it means to you, and how to get the most our of your time at IUP.

Again, anything you say will be confidential, and your real name will never be used in the study.  We need honesty in this study, and to get it, you will need to know that anything you say is kept confidential.  Also, you will be free at any time to leave the study if you no longer want to participate, at which point we will remove you from the study, and any data we have collected from you will be destroyed.

Please contact me with any further questions.  I truly hope you decide to take part in this study. If you do, you will help IUP, and all schools like it, to make better placement

decisions about writing classes, and it will be your voice that can create this change.  My goal as the investigator is to help make sure your voices are heard, because that is the only way to ensure we are making the right placement decisions on your behalf.

Appendix B

Informed Consent for Instructors

[on letterhead]

This study will attempt to examine whether or not the decisions made to place students into Basic Writing (ENGL 100) at IUP are the best possible decisions for all involved. In order to study this, we hope to look at the experiences that Basic Writing students go through over the course of the semester by conducting interviews, reading some written work, and observing an occasional class. We hope to build a relationship with participants that will help open up communication about feelings and attitudes toward the course, and placement into the course, and how this placement decision impacts their schooling and college life in general over the course of the semester. We are looking for all effects this placement might have, because we want to assess whether or not the placement decisions our program makes are indeed the right decisions.

In order to perform this study, we will seek a small number (6 to 8) of Basic Writing students whom we will study throughout the semester, though interviews, examination of written work, and occasional classroom visits. If any student from your class becomes a participant, your only involvement will be indirect, as your students will be the subject, not you or your teaching. This study is <u>not</u> about the effectiveness of the course or your teaching; it is purely focused on the <u>placement decision</u> and the impacts that it might have on a student beyond what is discernible from his or her course grades. Part of this investigation will include looking at student writing and speaking with them about the course; also, the principal investigator hopes to observe three to four classes over the course of the semester, with the instructor's permission, in order to examine his participants in that environment. At these times, you will be tangentially involved, and so we need your consent; but again, you and your teaching are not the subject of the study, and if at any time you feel that the study is problematic, you may withdraw by contacting either investigator (contact information listed below), and we will remove your student(s) from the study and destroy and data collected from him or her.

The potential risk involved is quite minimal: if one of your students is involved in the study, we will keep his or her identity confidential, and other than any classroom visit that the principal investigator set up with you, it is unlikely that you will be aware of the study at all. The benefits, however, will potentially consist of improving placement decisions at IUP, and gaining better insight into the lived experiences of Basic Writing students—both of which should be valuable to all involved in the process of composition instruction at IUP and elsewhere.

Anything that participants say in this study will be <u>confidential</u>, and no real names will be used in the study—not the students', the teachers', or IUP's. You will be free at any time to leave the study if you no longer want your student(s) to participate, at which point we will remove you all from the study, and any data we have collected from you will be destroyed.

Please contact me with any further questions. I truly hope you decide to take part in this study. If you do, you will help IUP, and all schools like it, to make better placement decisions about writing classes, which has the potential to positively affect all involved in the composition field.

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[on letterhead]

Dear ENGL 100 Instructors:


I am writing about a study taking place this fall semester that seeks to validate the placement decisions of ENGL 100 students.  My goal in this study is to examine the personal and social aspects of this decision as lived by the students who have been placed.  In order to look into their experiences, I will conduct interviews throughout the semester, ask to see written work, and hopefully (with your permission) attend a few classes in order to observe the participants in that setting.  This validation process will benefit all involved in IUP's composition program as it will seek to improve our placement decisions and make sure that the students are placed into the classes that will benefit them the most, both educationally and personally.


In order to acquire participants, I ask your permission to speak to each of your classes for approximately 15 minutes during a class in the second week of school (Sept. 7-11, 2009).  I want to tell the students about the study, and what I hope will be gained by all involved.  At the end of my brief talk, I will leave a box at the door where they may voluntarily submit their consent forms if they wish to participate.  Participation will be confidential, because they need to know that anything they say will have no impact on their grades, and so if any of your students volunteer, their identities will remain confidential.  To this end, I hope you will give me permission to speak to your class in private, with no faculty present.


If you have any questions about the study or your potential involvement, please feel free to contact me at j.lederman@iup.edu.  Additionally, Michael Williamson will serve as the study's co-investigator, so you can contract him with questions as well: mmwimson@iup.edu.


Thank you in advance for your help.  If you are willing to let me speak to your class, please email or call me at any time so that we can arrange a time for me to come in, hopefully during the week of September 7-11, 2009.

IUP English Placement Essay

**Option 1: Reflecting on Your Experiences with Writing**

**Instructions:**

1. Think about a time when you wrote something you considered "good."
2. Read the three passages* below
3. Then, use your own experience, as well as ideas from the passages, to explain what you consider to be good writing.
4. Plan to work on your essay for the entire period and write as much as you can, but also leave time so you can make changes to your draft. As you work on your essay, be sure to:
    1. use details in your description
    2. use at least one idea from the sources below to develop your explanation
    3. elaborate your points

**Passage #1:**

"Students often resist writing and writing teachers, and such resistance can be either healthy or unhealthy.... For example, with hours of drill on lie/lay and sit/set, tests on the eight comma rules, fill-in-the-blank questions about the ways to develop a paragraph, five points off for every misspelled word, students are probably right to resist such mindless "drill and kill" exercises often associated with being taught to write.

"Of course, usage, punctuation, paragraph development, and spelling are important in writing well, but we think that students realize that heavy emphasis on these issues by teachers often deflects attention from what students are thinking and saying.

"Unfortunately, schooling sometimes teaches students that the teacher is the enemy and that school work is irrelevant and alien to their concerns."
—Art Young and Beth Daniel

**Passage #2:**

"I am a writer today because I believe that I would never have been able to make this kind of sense of my life and my world if I hadn't kept at writing and kept at it for my own reasons and my own purposes. That's the payoff. That's why writers write. Since writing is often hard and always takes considerable time and energy, there has to be some trade-off. I have to get something from writing. What I get is the unexpected.

"I enjoy discovering things about myself and my world(s) that I had not known, and could not know before I wrote. Without tries at writing, I know I could not ever have discovered precisely these things. It's the recurring attempt, that try, that is what writing is all about."
—James Zebroski

**Passage #3:**

"The acquisition of new structure and forms [of writing] comes about through the use of language for meaningful communication… not through memorizing rules, and acquisition depends upon experimentation and risk taking.

"[Learning to write] is like other learning. People learn a new language or dialect and generate hypotheses about what that new language is like, about what its rules are, based on the data of what they hear and read."
—Eleanor Kutz

*These passages originally appeared in the anthology* The Subject Is Writing, *edited by Wendy Bishop, and are used with the permission of Heinemann Publishers.*

**IUP English Placement Essay**

**Option 2: Reflecting on Your Experiences with Reading**

**Instructions:**

1. Think about a time when you read something that mattered to you.
2. Read the three passages* below
3. Then use your own experience, as well as ideas from the passages, to explain how reading is meaningful or important to you.
4. Plan to work on your essay for the entire period and write as much as you can, but also leave time so you can make changes to your draft. As you work on your essay, be sure to:
     1. use details in your description,
     2. use at least one idea from the sources below to develop your explanation,
     3. elaborate your points.

**Passage #1:**

"Reading, like gardening, sometimes feels like too much work. I'd rather watch TV or a video, listen to a new CD, talk on the phone, go out to eat with friends, or play with my dog and cat. But my mind is always questioning why the world is the way it is; when I stop long enough to catch my breath, picking up a newspaper, magazine, or journal helps me sort out what I already know, what I need to find out, and how to think analytically about...the world."

**Passage #2:**

I don't always have time for a "big" book, but I can always find time to read an article. I carry around [reading materials] when I go to the dentist, when I travel by air, car, train, or bus, when I'm waiting for a friend in a restaurant… everywhere. There are magazines in my bathroom reading rack, on the living room coffee table, on the floor next to my bed, on the dining room table, and in stacks on the floor of my office."
—Lisa Albrecht

**Passage #3:**

"A text can be any object, including films, television programs, and music, as well as events such as the Oklahoma City bombing or historical conditions such as slavery. Thus, reading is not restricted to printed text, but includes any act of decoding and interpretation.

"Effective decoding (reading) of these texts relies on recognition of a set of conditions and circumstances—for example, laws, history, family, religion, education, and economics—that surround the text. These circumstances and conditions are referred to as contexts.

"One kind of context involves cultural biases and assumptions.... There is also a kind of context involving common knowledge and practice. This common knowledge and practice must be shared. Still another context involves acquiring new cultural knowledge. It must be learned."
—Akua Duku Anokye, Jamie Barlowe, and Camille Cain

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