CROSSING INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES: DEVELOPING AN ENTRANCE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT TO IMPROVE WRITING INSTRUCTION

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While we regret what we regard as a widespread over emphasis on large-scale testing, we have carried out the framework project because we care deeply about preparing students for whatever future they will face and because we believe that writing, because of its power to generate new knowledge as well as solve problems, can play a central role throughout our students' lives.

Michigan Council of Teachers of English

In April 1993, at the request of the Michigan State Department of Education, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English

(MCTE) completed a position statement and framework for a writing proficiency examination. The headnote above reflects the ambivalence inherent in such an undertaking: while MCTE is committed to the development of writing assessments that reflect the process-oriented pedagogies in use in Michigan classrooms, the pull towards large-scale testing often appears to value quantitative scores rather than communication and learning. Many of us who work with the large-scale assessment of writing share this position. The call for wide-spread testing is loud and compelling to those who want an "objective" account of how well teachers are teaching and of how well students are learning. The mystique of local news reports about falling standardized test scores, and the ease with which statistics can be used to support claims about the quality of education in particular areas, feed a desire to make education less subjective. But learning is messy: the variables that affect what students and teachers do in classrooms range over the entire scope of their lives, and the perpetual challenge to all those involved in education is to embrace a holistic view that admits all those variables. However, that vision of education, reflected in metaphors about growth, nurturance, and organisms, is at odds with the vision of education that leads to the demand for large-scale assessment, the vision that claims that the purpose of school is to train people to function within the dominant culture.

In 1963, James Baldwin delivered "A Talk to Teachers," in which he describes the paradox of education:

> The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself. . . . To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society.

For many of us who teach writing, our purpose, finally, is helping our students use writing in critical and creative ways, to stake out a place in this culture, to ask questions, to press for changes. Those features of writing that are easily measured—grammatical errors, sentence types, even paragraph cohesion—are important tools, but the end to which they are put is

ultimately more important, and this end, the effect writing has on the writer and on the writer's world, is very hard to measure. The farther removed assessment is from the actual situation of writing, the less involved the assessor is with the writer's effort to make meaning, and the more difficult the task of measurement becomes.

Ideally, the teaching and assessing of writing occur within a context that emphasizes the creation and the sharing of meaning between interested individuals. Classroom teachers struggle to create that setting, despite a host of situational constraints, and we have an extensive body of literature reflecting that struggle. The growing demands for large scale assessments, however, tax our present knowledge and challenge our beliefs. Large scale testing tends to pull us toward a functional, rather than a critical, approach to literacy. It is much easier to measure whether a writer can obey the rules of writing than it is to measure whether or not the writer can use writing to achieve a sense of his or her own identity. All over the country, people are struggling with the question of how to make large scale writing assessment consistent with the position that writing is fundamentally about making and sharing meaning.[1] All too often, the logistics of large-scale assessment—the numbers of students involved, the limited time available for the testing, and the cost of assessing the writing—point to the development of tests that do the least harm or are the least contradictory to what we believe about writing instruction. In this paper, we will describe our efforts to create a large-scale assessment process that supports, rather than contradicts, our belief that through writing, people can explore their own identities and question the society around them.

In 1979, the University of Michigan began assessing the writing of incoming students. Conscious of the impact their test would have on the curricula of Michigan high school English classes, faculty in the English Composition Board (ECB) created a test in which students had to create a whole text, rather than testing students' knowledge of the grammar of Standard English. The test that was developed is a fifty-minute impromptu on a topic drawn from current events. The timed essays are scored on a multiple-trait scale, and the students are then placed into the appropriate level of the writing program. Roughly ten percent of entering students are required to take a writing practicum, an

intensive half-semester course that allows for a great deal of regular, individual instruction in addition to class time. Most writers are placed into a one-semester composition class taught in the English department, and a very small number of students are exempted from any introductory-level writing class. At the time the impromptu writing assessment was put into place, many high school students were not regularly asked to create whole texts. Instead, class time was devoted to work with sentences and paragraphs—the basic skills. By asking for a whole text, in which what was said mattered along with the way ideas were presented, the ECB was modeling an approach to writing consistent with the approach taken in their writing classes.

Over the past several years, we have grown increasingly concerned about the form of our assessment test. Teachers in the state of Michigan, for the most part, are encouraging students to compose whole texts; their teaching is guided by the belief that writing is about making meaning, rather than simply being a technical exercise in correctness. Furthermore, across the state, students are learning that writing is a process, that writing can be collaborative, that writing can be a way for them to communicate with readers. Although the impromptu writing test regularly identified the students coming into the University who were most in need of further writing instruction, with increasing frequency, it is not consistent with the way students are taught to write at their high schools. If anything, the impromptu test supports instruction that focuses on the five-paragraph essay written without the benefit of revision. Nor does the test reflect the principles we value in our own classes, where we encourage writing, reflection, and careful revising. Furthermore, we began to be cognizant of the fact that the impromptu writing bears little relationship to what students will write in their following years at the university; and finally, we doubted whether the cramped conditions of mass testing on a hectic summer morning, the time limit, and the topics for the impromptus, which caught some writers by surprise, allowed writers to display their strengths.

To have students' first experience of writing at the University be antithetical both to the writing they did in high school and to the writing we encourage in our program and in our college was too great a compromise, so we began to explore alternatives to the impromptu assessment, wondering, for instance, whether a test that gave students more reading, and more time to write,

would enable students to perform better. At the same time that we were reconsidering the nature of our incoming assessment, Michigan's State Department of Education recommended that school districts across the state begin using portfolios to assess students' writing abilities. The State Department of Education stopped short of requiring writing portfolios, but the State Legislature did pass a law linking state aid to the keeping of general portfolios for each student. All public schools in Michigan are now expected to maintain portfolios for each student, consisting of information about the student's academic, extracurricular and work-related experiences. The Department of Education is also planning to develop a state competency test in writing within the next three years. The MCTE's writing framework for the proposed proficiency exam is currently under consideration. In it, MCTE recommends a three-strand examination: strand one consists of two pieces of writing, one from an English class and one from another class, that best demonstrate students' proficiency as writers. For strand two, students will be asked to write for at least 30 minutes in class about their writing process in general, or about one or both of the pieces selected for strand one. Strand three asks students to develop a piece of writing over two days. On the first day, students would have 45 minutes to read and or view brief items, and then write a summary or response. On the second day, students would be asked to write on a prompt which is linked thematically to the material presented on day one. Two fifteen minute breaks would allow students to consult with peers.

At a time when the assessment of writing at the state level is receiving a great deal of attention, the visibility of our university within the state underscored the need for us to reconsider the way we assess the writing of incoming students. As long as we claim that a fifty minute impromptu is adequate for our purposes, we have to anticipate that the state Department of Education or the legislature might make the claim that there is no need to develop such a complex test: if the University of Michigan can assess writing in 50 minutes, why can't the State Department of Education? The best thing we could do with our incoming assessment, we decided, would be to design it so that it supported the best writing instruction throughout the state, and the form that seemed most compelling to us was portfolio assessment. Having shifted from an impromptu exam to a portfolio

exit assessment in our own classes, we knew the ways in which portfolios enabled our students to present a more well-rounded portrait of their writing. Ignoring for a moment the daunting logistical challenges of assessing 6,000 portfolios each year, we began to explore the form these entrance portfolios might take.

The issue of when and how to use portfolios is one of the central questions we must address as a community. Brian Huot has argued that entry-level portfolio assessment is akin to "using a sledgehammer to kill a cockroach" (Portfolio). He claims that the distinctions made at entry assessment are not so fine as to require either the wealth of information a portfolio can provide or the tremendous expense in time and money involved in portfolio reading. It is true that portfolio assessment is more costly than other forms of assessment; looking only at the logistics of assessment, however, fails to take into consideration the educational, social, and political contexts in which assessment occurs. If our only goal were to place students into writing courses, we could simply use SAT verbal scores. However, entry level portfolio assessment stands as a bridge uniting K-12 writing instruction and writing instruction at the college level, and it can serve as a much needed catalyst for conversations among writing teachers at all levels. The move from using direct tests of writing to portfolios for entry assessment is analogous to the shift from indirect tests of writing to direct tests: the changes were made not because people expected dramatic shifts in placement patterns, but because good tests reflect state of the art thinking within the field, and because those who administer tests know that the form of the test influences teaching practices. No longer can we ignore the fact that maintaining a single impromptu as the bridge between K-12 and college is detrimental to best teaching practices. We believe we can support the use of portfolios and the emphasis on reflective, thoughtful writing processes in K-12 teaching by asking incoming students for well designed portfolios in our entry assessment supports those practices.

Developing Portfolio Requirements

As we began to think about undertaking a pilot portfolio project, we began talking with other teachers. In August 1991, we visited with faculty at Miami University to learn about their entrance portfolio system. We met with portfolio readers and

with high school teachers, in addition to talking with program administrators. In September 1991 we presented a draft of our proposal at the annual Michigan Council of Teachers of English meeting. We also arranged to visit fourteen high schools from eleven different school districts in the state. We selected one group of schools based on the numbers of students they send to our university. Any change in our assessment would have the greatest impact on these schools, and we hoped that by talking with students at these schools, we might persuade them to submit portfolios. The second group of schools was selected because of the ways they differed from the largest "feeder" schools. We were anxious to avoid the problem of creating a project that enfranchised students from schools already well-represented at Michigan, while excluding students from less well-represented districts.

We tried to arrange our visits so that they were mutually beneficial, distancing ourselves as much as possible from the research model where university people use K-12 classrooms and teachers as mines, extracting material and then leaving with it, to use it for their own purposes. We were clear that we needed help from teachers and students in shaping the contents of the portfolio. In exchange, we asked language arts coordinators and principals and department heads how our visit might serve some of their own purposes. Over and over again, we were told that teachers really wanted to know what college teachers expect from incoming students. Teachers expressed great frustration about the pressure of silent expectations from college teachers. They also used our visit as an occasion to review those parts of their writing curriculum that existed to satisfy "college" expectations. The richness of those discussions, and their practical implications—rethinking requirements for research papers, rethinking the role of literature in the English curriculum, rethinking the use of "I" and the role of personal knowledge—indicates a tremendous need for more conversation among teachers at all levels. High school teachers discovered that they were laboring under some misconceptions about what we expect, and we discovered that we were doing the same. All too often, introductory writing courses at our university are taught as though students have never revised, have never worked in peer groups, have never kept journals. In fact, teachers told us, students complain about not being challenged

enough. Teachers on both sides of the high school/college boundary have much to gain by talking more, and for us, in our context, the advent of a portfolio system for entry assessment became a catalyst for beginning those conversations.

As we talked with teachers, we found that our assumptions about what we were trying to do with portfolio assessment changed radically. Initially, our unspoken agenda was to use the portfolio as a way of pressuring high school students and teachers to take notice of our curriculum: by asking for an argumentative essay as we defined it, we hoped that high school teachers would begin teaching it. After all, we reasoned, we wanted to judge whether students were capable of producing academic arguments, which we know to be the most common type of writing at our institution. We assumed the best assessment would tell us which entering students could already complete the writing that would be asked for them. So in the first draft of our portfolio description, we asked for an argument (which we characterized as an inquiry paper, rather than a persuasive paper), along with a narrative, a paper of the student's own choosing, and a piece in which the student reflected on the writing in his/her portfolio (see Appendix A for a more detailed description). We quickly became uncomfortable with the position vis-a-vis the high school curriculum embodied in our draft of the portfolio contents. The argumentative/inquiry essay—in which a writer begins with a question and explores several sides before reaching a conclusion—is not a major part of the high school curriculum, and we realized that despite our rhetoric, our initial portfolio draft was in effect an attempt to determine curriculum for high school courses, trying to get high school English teachers to be more like us. Consequently, we dropped everything but the reflective piece.

For us, and for many of the high school teachers we spoke with, the reflective writing is the most valuable part of the portfolio. The reflective writing we wanted was not generally part of the high school curricula we learned about, but unlike the inquiry paper, reflection is something that many high school teachers intend to build into their writing programs. Our assumption is that students who are given opportunities to think about what they've written, and how they wrote it, and why they wrote what they did, begin to develop the tools of self-awareness as writers that will help them make sense out of any

number of writing tasks. Talking about reflection in the classroom, and asking students to use writing to reflect on their own work, places students in the center of their writing process: they are making choices; they are using various strategies, for their own reasons. Without reflection, writing in school is too easily understood by students as something external—a set of forms, a series of routines. The teachers hold most of the power, because they prescribe the rules. Reflection turns that around: students discover their own rules for producing writing. Because teachers at all levels agreed on the importance of reflection, we included it in the portfolios. Even though many students had had few opportunities for formal reflection, teachers agreed that they would like that to happen, and students seemed interested in the possibility.

We began asking teachers what they would like us to include in our portfolio in addition to reflective writing. Some teachers suggested that we simply ask for three pieces of writing and let students make the decisions about what to include. While this had the advantage of removing the spectre of college teachers telling high school teachers what to do, we were reluctant to take that step. In spite of potential conflicts between writing teachers, it seemed to us important to try to define areas of common interest, so that the portfolio we asked for would support particular aspects of the high school writing curriculum. Another teacher suggested that we abandon our talk of types of writing and focus instead on process. Why not ask for a series of drafts, and ask the student to write about how the piece had developed over time? To make such a request would support the emphasis on process in the high schools. We agreed that would be useful and then discussed that request with students. Students pointed out two problems with our request as stated. First of all, many of them no longer had early drafts. Our request for portfolios was coming at the end of the school year, and early drafts of papers had long since been discarded. Other students pointed that since they compose on computers, they never had paper copies of early drafts. Students also pointed out, cynically, that no matter what process they used to write a paper, they all knew what we wanted to hear. We could expect, they said, to read a series of comments about prewriting, drafting, editing and revising, even when their actual composing process was much more exciting than that: staying

up till the early hours of the morning and writing in an adrenaline rush; thinking for days about the assignment and then just writing it; or working with a friend outside of school.

In the end we did ask for a piece of writing that the student had worked on over a period of time, and we asked that the student tell us something about the way he or she had written it (see Appendix B). We were careful to write in the instructions that writers use many different processes, and that the best process is the one that works best for a particular writer on a given task at a given time. We also asked for a second piece of writing from a class other than English or Language Arts. English teachers at every high school we visited complained bitterly that although writing belongs in courses throughout the curriculum, and although some districts even pay tribute to the idea of writing across the curriculum, the perception that writing is the special responsibility of English teachers still persists. In designing our portfolio, we struggled with the dilemma of wanting to support the credibility and desirability of writing across the curriculum, while at the same time not penalizing students for lacking opportunities to write in other classes. Students at the high schools we visited confirmed our concern that we might be penalizing them: many reported having few opportunities to write in other classes. Those who were writing were often doing it in AP history or government courses. Hence, the language we used in the first letter that went out to students stopped short of insisting; instead, we stated that we "preferred" writing from other classes.

Finally, with encouragement from a few visionary teachers, we asked students to submit their best or favorite piece of writing. As teachers, one of our most important goals is to encourage a sense that writing matters; that writing is not only something to do in school, but also, and more importantly, something writers can do for themselves. This is perhaps the most difficult category. Many teachers advised us to rule out poetry, because if we didn't, we would get a lot of it. Teachers worried that students think their best writing is their love poetry, which in reality might be heartfelt but not good. In any case the poetry would be hard to judge, and students' ability to write good poems is not necessarily indicative of their ability to construct a good academic piece of writing. At the same time, if

students are writing poetry, and if that poetry is the most meaningful writing the students are doing, it seemed antithetical to our practice to exclude it. Teachers also worried that students might confuse their favorite piece of writing with their best piece of writing and end up submitting something that in fact misrepresented their abilities. We worried as well, but finally decided that it was more important to give students an opportunity to make the decision for themselves than it was to avoid potential chaos. What we did do was to ask students to explain what they liked about the piece they submitted under this heading.

In the course of our conversations, the reflective piece had also been transformed. Instead of a single cover page, we asked students to address questions particular to each of the other pieces of writing in their portfolios. For the piece of writing from a class other than English, we asked students to write about what they had learned. For the piece of writing that resulted from a set of drafts, we asked students to talk about the process they used. For the piece that was the best or favorite, we asked students to explain what they liked about it. We considered these reflective pieces to be the glue which held the portfolio together because the pieces offered students the opportunity to explain their portfolio to us. They could use them to explain anomalies in their portfolio: If students didn't have a paper from a discipline other than English, they could use the companion piece to explain why they didn't, as well as to explain why they chose the replacement piece that they did. If students didn't have drafts, they could explain the reasons here. If they exceeded the page limit (15 typed double spaced pages), they could tell us why they needed to. If they included heartfelt and potentially obscure poetry, they might include a very fine explanation of it. On the other hand, even if every piece was appropriate to what we invited, the companion piece allowed the opportunity for students to reflect on the writing.

One decision in the pilot project was whether the portfolios we collected in the first year would "count" as we considered the students' placement into a writing course. Students informed us that they wouldn't take the time to assemble a portfolio unless it would count, which complicated our task. We had assumed that we could work with a select group of students from the high schools with which we had had contact—we were hoping

to receive 250 portfolios—but later learned that if these portfolios were going to figure into the student's actual assessment, we would have to extend the opportunity to submit portfolios to everyone. Faced with the decision to do a very small version of the project, trusting that students' good will would be reason enough to prepare and submit a portfolio, or to do a potentially large, chaotic project, we chose the latter. In early April 1992, letters inviting students to submit portfolios were included in the mailing from the Orientation Office to all students who had already been admitted and had paid their deposit. That mailing went out to about 6000 students, and we received 615 portfolios, an 11% return.

Reading as Teachers

One of the first issues we had to grapple with as we thought about how to assess the portfolios we received was whether we would rate or place them. Our impromptu assessment is based on a multiple trait rating scale, and over the past fifteen years readers have been carefully (and sometimes vigorously) coached not to bring up the issue of placement, but rather to focus simply on the student's text and the criteria sheet. This feeling is so ingrained in readers that when a question of placement comes up, readers raising questions almost always acknowledge that they are acting inappropriately. In contrast to the strong focus on rating in the entrance assessment, in our practicum courses (the lowest level composition courses at Michigan, which are taught by faculty in the ECB), we assess students' work through a portfolio. As we assess that work, we focus exclusively on placement: should the student repeat the course, take the next level of composition, or be exempted from an introductory composition requirement? Having had this experience of assessing portfolios for placing students in writing courses, we felt we could read incoming students from a similar perspective, putting decisions squarely in the hands of teachers, making the consequences of the assessment tangible and overt. The question we asked about each portfolio we read was this: based on the writing the student has chosen to submit, what writing course will be most beneficial?[2]

One reason we had not explored the possibility of placing

students based on their impromptu exams was that the writing program at Michigan is fragmented. While most of the writing program is housed within the English Composition Board, the large introductory writing course is offered by the English department and run as an entirely separate program. Because teachers who teach the introductory course rarely meet with those who teach the pre-composition course, distrust abounds. When we decided to place students based on their portfolios, rather than rate the portfolios, we were committing ourselves to creating a team of readers who would collaboratively establish a coherent description of the heretofore fragmented writing curriculum. Portfolio readers had only three choices to make about each portfolio they read: should the student be in a writing practicum course, in the traditional introductory composition course, or exempt from first year composition? To make informed decisions about placement in courses, all readers would need to know about the whole writing program. Because the arrival of portfolios on campus and our decision to place students in particular courses based on their portfolios necessitated more talk among teachers from the two programs, we assembled a team of ten readers, half from our own department and half from other departments.

As is true of most writing assessment programs, people who read our impromptu assessment are trained to use a set of criteria developed prior to the training. In thinking about managing the portfolio reading, we decided not to develop criteria beforehand and then train everyone else to use them. Instead, we decided to let the team develop criteria together, trusting the expertise of our readers. So, on our first day together, we began by looking at official course descriptions and talking about the ways we teach our courses. Then, we read some portfolios, wrote our own evaluations of them, and shared with each other the criteria we each had used. To represent the three possible placements, Exempt, Introductory Composition, and Practicum, we constructed three distinct images of a student.

1) **Exempt:** Student may benefit from self-selected writing courses; may benefit from individualized consultations in the Writing Workshop; does not need structured support offered by a required writing course.

2) **Introductory Composition:** Student needs more experience with academic writing; will benefit from large group

instruction; has skills enough to succeed without lots of individual attention.

3) **Practicum:** Student needs individualized instruction in a safe, consistent, supportive environment.

Within each category we had other more objective language that referred specifically to aspects of texts, but our discussions usually began with a discussion of the student as a writer. Because of the combination of writing and reflection, we gained a much clearer vision of students' writing experiences and abilities, and their own understanding of their abilities, than we ever could infer from their bluebooks. We felt much more comfortable talking about the kind of support the student probably needed. Talking in this way turned the conversation from evaluation to diagnosis, in ways that helped all of us as teachers think about the courses we teach and the expectations we have of students as writers. One of our goals in continuing the portfolio project is to extend this conversation about teaching.

As we expected, much of our sense of the student was revealed in the companion reflective pieces, and our placement decisions were affected by them. When poor reflective pieces raised questions in our minds about the students' competence, we looked more carefully at the other pieces in the portfolio to try to account for the relatively weak performance. Some students simply included the assignment to which the writing responded, but the pieces in their portfolio were quite competent. In such cases we assumed that the student misread our request and determined that the assignment was enough. But if the portfolio as a whole was weak, this misreading seemed consistent with the quality of the portfolio and reinforced our judgment that a low placement was appropriate. When a portfolio included a detailed and informative description of the origin of the writing, intelligent analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the writing, and cogent explanation of why the writer liked or included the piece, an otherwise poor portfolio might receive a higher placement.

Results of Reading as Teachers

One of our concerns about reading as teachers, and embracing the chaos of talking about curriculum and students and

teaching along with the writing, was that our reliability would decrease. In fact, we expected this to happen, assuming that the more variables we introduced in the decision making process, the more room there would be for dissenting opinions. However, we were willing to risk the loss of statistical reliability because we assumed that the richer the conversations were about the portfolios, the more variables we considered, the more valid our decisions would be.[3] As Huot notes, a "rich rating of student writing should include the personal, variable features of [raters'] fluent reading process" (Reliability 211).

We were also concerned that the pattern of portfolio placement would be significantly different from that of the impromptu. Table 1 compares the portfolio placement rates for students submitting portfolios with the placement rates from those students' impromptu exams, as well as with the placement rates from the impromptu assessment of all entering students. The portfolios provided more placements at each end of the spectrum: readers placed a higher percentage of those students either exempt or practicum based on portfolio readings than on impromptu readings.

	Placements Based on Portfolios	Placements Based on Impromptus, Students Submitting Portfolios	Placements Based on Impromptus, All Students
Exempt Intro.	70 (11.4%)	21 (3.4%)	376 (6.9%)
Composition	459 (74.6%)	558 (90.7%)	4503 (82.1%)
Practicum	86 (14.0%)	36 (5.9%)	604 (11.0%)
Total	615 (100.0%)	615 (100.0%)	5483 (100.0%)

Table 1
Placement Rates for Portfolios vs. Impromptus

We expected that more students would be exempted based on their portfolios; we were surprised to find that more students were also placed into practicum. We attribute that finding to two things. First of all, teachers had more evidence of students' writing abilities to look at, and so were more able to see discrepant performances. With the impromptu exam, a weak

writer can manage a passing performance if they are relatively skilled in writing some modified form of the five-paragraph essay. Readers also tend to be conscious of the fact that the text they are reading was written under adverse conditions and is meant as a first draft. There is no easy formula for writing a good portfolio, however, and readers were aware of the fact that the student was making choices about what to submit and that the student had time to revise work. Moreover, some of the students who were most excited about the opportunity to send in portfolios were those least confident about their writing. Perhaps the population of students who elected to submit portfolios includes a relatively high concentration of writers who perceive themselves as weak.

As we expected, another difference between the portfolio-based placements and the impromptu placements was the rate at which readers disagreed with each other. The placement scoring of the portfolios resulted in disagreements about placement even when readers had fairly similar reactions to portfolios; 38% of the portfolios required a third read, a much higher percentage than in our impromptu assessment. In our impromptu assessment, as with most large scale assessments, readers assign scores, those scores are fed into a computer, and the decision about placement is made, in effect, by the computer, using a pre-programmed scale. We have a small community of readers and over time the reliability of our impromptu assessment has greatly increased so that currently, fewer than five percent of essays require a third reader. We suspect that the increased frequency of reader disagreement is due to the difference in scoring systems. Unlike our impromptu assessment, where two scores within six points of each other are considered the same, here, every time two readers differed, we noted it.

The issue of reliability in portfolio scoring has been a vexing question. Finding that about every third portfolio needed to be read by a third reader and that a few portfolios received every possible placement and required a fourth reader was initially disconcerting, especially given our collective experience with our highly reliable impomptu readings. But we quickly realized that agreement on placement, while important in very real ways for the student registering for courses, was not the central issue of

the portfolio reading process. The third readings, and conversations among disagreeing readers, provided the opportunity for readers to talk with each other about how they read students' work and why they placed portfolios as they did. And in this way, the process of reading portfolios became very different than the process of reading impromptu essays. Peter Elbow argues that while judgment and evaluation are necessary and important parts of the educational process, the "crude, oversimple way of *representing* judgment—distorting it, really—into a single number . . . means ranking people and performance along a single continuum," and the emphasis on agreement on numerical scores gets in the way of teachers and evaluators talking with each other and with students about the features and dimensions of students' texts (191). Too, as Robert Broad helpfully reminds us, if portfolio assessment produces the same outcome—a single numeric score—as other forms of assessment, we ignore the power and potential of difference and context in the assessment process. We treated the third (and fourth) reads not as divergent readings that needed to be somehow eliminated over time, but as opportunities for teachers to share their perspectives, values, and pedagogies with each other.

Given the number of portfolios that we received and placement patterns we saw, we could claim this pilot portfolio project a success. We had initially feared that portfolios would make it difficult to identify students who needed our practicum, since revised work might mask writing problems. That did not happen. Because we could appropriately place our entering students, we are happy with what has happened in the last year. However, the placement rates, which may testify to the success of the project, also lend credence to the argument that if portfolios only produce the same result as the old system, there is no reason to change. In considering this argument, we must turn our attention to the meaning of assessment and the evaluation process itself. In fact, as we look back on this project, we find the most exciting results not in the placement patterns but in the conversations we have begun with high school teachers in the state, conversations among teachers in our own university, and conversations with students about their portfolios (all students who submitted portfolios this year were invited by letter

to visit the writing workshop to talk with an instructor their about the work in their portfolio).

Our work with entrance portfolios has raised more questions than it has answered. We believe now, more firmly than before, that portfolios as an entry assessment can be a powerful force in creating ties between high schools and colleges. We have continued our contact with high school teachers and look forward to finding ways to encourage these avenues of communication. We are also working to strengthen ties between our part of the writing program, the Introductory Composition program, and the disciplines. We plan several forums when teachers from different parts of the university can talk about their assignments and about students' portfolios. Such conversations will allow all of us to better meet our students' needs. While we hope that our portfolio project will support good writing instruction and good writing assessment within our state, we are equally hopeful that these portfolios will change the university as well. If students enter the university with a portfolio in hand, they enter with something to show when teachers ask what the student knows—if the teacher asks. Perhaps if more students enter the university with a portfolio in hand, more teachers will ask.

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Appendix A

Description of Entrance Portfolio: Draft 10/17/91

Our goal in redesigning the entrance assessment at our university is twofold: first, we want to be better able to match incoming students' needs with our writing curriculum. At the same time, we would like to develop an entrance assessment which builds upon work with writing going on in high schools. The two questions we are particularly interested in are these: 1) what types of writing can we expect from graduating seniors? and 2) what kinds of criteria are appropriate to use in assessing portfolios of entering students' work?

Portfolio Contents:

Portfolios should be no longer than 15 pages typed, double-spaced; contents must be typed. Portfolios are due in the English Composition Board by June 5, 1992. They will be returned to students at their initial appointment with their academic counselor. Each portfolio should include the following:

1. A reflective letter, in which the writer introduces his or her portfolio to the readers, describing the contents and the significance of those pieces.

2. An inquiry paper, in which the writer states a thesis or hypothesis and investigates the topic, presenting evidence that supports his or her position, and considers reasons why others might hold a somewhat different position. The topic for an inquiry paper could come as readily from a science or history course as from an English course.

3. A narrative/description paper, based on personal experience, written to help a reader understand the significance of the experience for the writer.

4. A paper of the student's own choosing that demonstrates his or her strengths as a writer.

Appendix B

Writing Portfolios at Michigan

Congratulations on your admission to the University of Michigan. Writing plays a critical role in college, so it is important to match the writing abilities of incoming students with writing courses that offer an appropriate level of support. For fifteen years, University of Michigan students' writing ability has been measured through a timed writing test, administered during Orientation. This summer, all students will still be required to take the writing test during Orientation, but for the first time, students are also invited to submit a portfolio of writing to the English Composition Board. Placement decisions will be made based on a consideration of both the writing in your portfolio and your performance on the writing test.

The Michigan Portfolio consists of a table of contents, three separate pieces of writing, plus an explanation of each of those three pieces (see description below). The length of the individual pieces may vary, but the combined length of the writings in the portfolio should be between 10 and 15 typed, double-spaced pages (8 1/2″ x 11″). Writers should put their name and social security in the upper right hand corner of each page in the portfolio. Do not submit your portfolio in a folder. Instead, staple the pages of the portfolio together. Portfolios can be picked up at the English Composition Board in 1025 Angell Hall during Orientation, or in September 1992. Portfolios that are not claimed by the end of September will not be saved.

Portfolio Contents:

- A table of contents including your name and social security number, your address, the date, and a list of the pieces in the portfolio.
- A piece of writing for which you wrote several drafts. Include a description of the assignment or the occasion which prompted you to write this piece, and explain the process you used to develop this particular piece of writing. Writers use many different processes, and the best process is the one that works effectively in a particular situation.

• A piece of writing, any length, preferably from a class other than English, that demonstrates your ability to use writing as a way of learning about a subject. Include a description of the assignment and the course for which you wrote it, and explain how this piece helped you clarify your understanding of the particular subject.

• A piece of writing most representative of your work. This might be either your best or your favorite piece of writing. Include a description of the assignment or the occasion for writing, and explain what the strengths of this particular piece of writing are.

Portfolio readers are particularly interested in:

- your ability to discuss your own writing
- your ability to communicate clearly and effectively
- your ability to develop and analyze ideas

NOTES

[1]Michael Williamson provides a helpful overview of the theoretical tensions implicit in large-scale testing in "An Introduction to Holistic Scoring: The Social, Historical and Theoretical Context for Writing Assessment," with particular attention to the relationships between psychometricians and composition theorists.

[2]William Smith argues that this type of rating should be called placement rating, not holistic rating, although holistic rating is the term most commonly used both in his program at the University of Pittsburgh, at the University of Michigan, and elsewhere. Smith provides a concise discussion of the salient differences between holistic and placement rating: rater disagreements cannot be solved by arithmetic and instead require further reading and consultation, the assessment has an immediate and direct impact on students, and the rating scale refers to courses in the writing program rather than to abstract textual features (146-150).

[3]See Brian Huot's "Reliability, Validity, and Holistic Scoring" for an extended discussion of the early over-emphasis on reliability in writing assessment at the expense of issues of validity.