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WRITEPLACER *PLUS* IN PLACE

An Exploratory Case Study

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In 2001, we published an essay in *College English* entitled “What Happens When Machines Read Our Students’ Writing?” In it, we discussed two computer programs, then relatively new to the market, that were designed to evaluate student writing automatically: WritePlacer *Plus*, developed by Vantage Technology, and Intelligent Essay Assessor, developed by three University of Colorado faculty who incorporated as Knowledge Analysis Technologies to market it. At this time, ETS had also developed its own program, e-rater, and was using it to score essays for the Graduate Management Admissions Test.

Flash forward to 2004, and a quick check of company Web sites shows that business is booming for these companies’ automatic-scoring programs, with all marketing a range of products and listing a range of clients from educational institutions and state departments of education to publishing companies and the military.¹ In this chapter, we return to one of the programs we examined in 2001, WritePlacer *Plus*. If you Google WritePlacer, you come up with approximately three hundred hits, most of them testing-center Web pages at schools using WritePlacer *Plus*, many of them community colleges and most of them public institutions.

Our 2001 study was based on our own examination of WritePlacer *Plus*. In it, we raised concerns about the cost of computer-scored writing, of how computer-scored placement testing removes faculty from the placement process, and how writing to a computer distorts the nature of writing as a meaning-making and rhetorical activity. But these concerns, however deeply felt, were grounded in our own past experience. Were we simply resisting change, fearing for our own obsolescence? So we wanted to test these concerns against an actual case. How would WritePlacer *Plus* be experienced when used by a school for placement purposes? Why did schools choose to use WritePlacer *Plus*? How did administrators and faculty assess its impact? How did students perceive having their writing evaluated by a computer program?

Central to our inquiry is the question of validity. Is the test evaluating what it aims to evaluate? For us, *construct validity* remained a key concern for WritePlacer *Plus* because of our belief that it distorts the nature of the construct “writing.” Would test administrators, faculty, and students see it this way too? We were concerned as well with what Samuel Messick (1989) terms the *consequential basis* for validity, specifically the “potential social consequences of test use” (85). Those consequences, for Messick, include both “unintended outcomes and side effects” (86). One of Messick’s examples is “the curriculum enhancement function of such tests as those of the College Board’s Advanced Placement Program, where the utility of the test resides partly in its effect on the quality of secondary school curricula” (85). This implied positive effect is realized only if the tests are valid, which is itself a question of values: for example, does the AP literature test construct the learning of literature in ways that match with the values of most teachers of literature? In considering the consequential basis for WritePlacer *Plus*, any potential effect on curriculum needs to be concerned with how the testing process constructs the activity of writing.

To begin to examine these questions, we conducted an exploratory case study at a community college that we’ll call Valley College. At this college, the testing center had been using WritePlacer *Plus* for the past two years to place its incoming students in a three-course sequence of first-year writing classes, the first course being developmental. Before the institution of WritePlacer *Plus* as a placement vehicle, faculty had themselves been reading placement essays and scoring them holistically for some eighteen years.

To gather our information, we held one-hour interviews with the two administrators who brought the program to the college; forty-five-minute interviews with three English faculty who were involved in the change of placement systems; and twenty-minute interviews with ten students who had just completed the computer-scored placement test. The protocols for our interviews with students and faculty are included in appendix A. In addition, we visited and observed the testing site and talked with the staff that ran the Testing and Advising Center. All in all, we spent the best part of three days at the college. We felt entirely welcome. Both administrators and two of the three faculty we interviewed had read our 2001 article in *College English*. Despite that, we were warmly and openly received by the administration, faculty, and staff and given wide access to the placement process and its participants. One faculty member declined to be interviewed; the others agreed willingly.

What we found, in general, was a system that was functioning smoothly within its institution. The administrators were generally satisfied with the new placement program; the faculty were generally opposed to the new program; and the students were generally unaware that their writing was being read by a computer. When we told the students we had interviewed that this was the case, some of them were, in different degrees and in different ways, disturbed.

The administrators were on balance satisfied with the computer-scored placement system, though they acknowledged that with it came some gains and some losses. The dean of the college had been at Valley College for twenty-seven years, first as an English teacher for seven years and then as an academic administrator. He reviewed the history of the placement system: twenty-two years ago they had their faculty trained in holistic scoring for placement purposes—a system that he termed, in its time, “wonderful.” Six hundred to eight hundred incoming students were tested in four to five groups; the placement essays were read by a team of four from the English department. The admissions process, including the placement process, was, as he described it, cumbersome for students: incoming students would come to the college, get a form, go home to fill it out, come back, pay a fee, sign up for a testing session and go home, come back for the testing session, go home, and then, after the placement results were in, come back again to register for fall courses.

Then, as he told us, the state moved to enrollment-driven budgeting. The college’s president called together an Enrollment Management Team, telling its members, “We are going to have the finest registration process . . . one-stop registration.” The English faculty and the dean wanted to keep the placement system as it was, but from the dean’s perspective, it was hard to keep it going. They tried to accommodate to the mandate of “one-stop shopping” by having faculty available every day during the summer to read the essays, but that proved difficult, as “they were off in Maine or the Cape. It was their system, but they were not there to make it go. I did everything I could, but it fell apart.” The dean hired a new director of the Testing and Advising Center, a person who had had experience with WritePlacer *Plus* at several other institutions, and in the spring of 2002 they brought WritePlacer *Plus* in; it was fully implemented as a placement tool in the summer of 2002. There were no faculty complaints about misplaced students, so the system seemed to be “working.” In closing, the dean told us, “I prefer the old method, but the old system wasn’t working—it became routine, sometimes we used

old essays as range-finders, sometimes scanted on the norming process. The old system was not the golden age.”

When we asked the administrator in charge of the testing program why they were using WritePlacer *Plus* to score incoming students’ writing-placement test, she echoed the dean in saying that “the college had moved to a one-stop shopping type of placement,” that with the holistically scored essay-placement system it was “difficult to find readers in a timely enough manner,” and she added that the old system was “not cost-effective.” Not only did the administration want one-stop shopping, “students didn’t want to come back for a second day” in order to complete the admission and registration processes. She described the institution’s initial testing of the computer-scoring system: faculty scored student writing against the same rubric as the computer, and there was a correlation of .79. When we asked her whether she was “satisfied” with the new system, she said, “as satisfied as you’re going to be with an instrument.” It is “as valid as any type of placement is.” Interestingly, she argued that even with computer-scored placement “you need to do that intake essay in the first class . . . because the day you wrote for the computer might have been a bad day. . . . The greatest thing about WritePlacer is that it takes out bias. . . . It is a very fair test. . . . Administratively, it is a thousand times easier.” On the other hand, she was candid about what was lost under the new placement system. “The faculty should have input as to who gets into their classes,” and “If the faculty saw all of these essays, they’d have a better sense of all the students—to make them better teachers, they need to see that full spectrum.” And, in thinking about the old system in which the faculty read placement essays, she remembered that the faculty readers picked up on suicidal students. “You’d miss that with the computer.”

The first faculty member we interviewed (whom we’ll call A) had taught at Valley for many years. When WritePlacer was first suggested, A told us, “I kind of backed off the entire controversy about three years ago. I really didn’t want to get involved. People got very heated about WritePlacer versus the old method. Quite frankly, I did not want to step into that swamp. . . . I decided that I would not make a big deal about it. It was an administrator’s decision apparently to do it, and I didn’t want to lose energy over it. . . . It is the enemy. When I hear about Web pages and Blackboard, I reach for my gun.” When we asked A about the use of WritePlacer as an exit test—something we’d heard about in talking with other faculty—A said, “I give my students grades, and I have faith in the grades, and I don’t feel that I should have to be second-guessed by a machine.”

The second faculty member we interviewed (whom we'll call B) had been at the college for just a few years. B had also worked with the faculty-scored placement system. B loved the old placement system, because when faculty read the placement tests "it was good to do things together with faculty and we'd be able to talk about writing. . . . I thought that was good for us." B saw the computer-scored test as under-placing ESL students and thought that the computer gave too much weight to mechanical errors in generating its scores. If offered the choice, B would go back to the old system "[b]ecause it is so easy for us to blame the machines. And we don't have to take responsibility. And also I think that just for the discussions that would go on during and after the meetings—these were really helpful. Otherwise, there are so few opportunities to talk about what we do in the classroom." B was eloquent about the "disaster" of using WritePlacer *Plus* as an exit test for Composition 101, a writing course, and Composition 102, a course in responding to literature. B saw WritePlacer *Plus* as inevitable as a placement-testing tool, given the "one-stop shopping" approach to registration, but was not sure that students could not use a little time in thinking about their academic program as they approached their first year at the college. But B was absolutely opposed to extending WritePlacer *Plus* to the tutoring center, to be used by students for feedback on their writing. "Oh, my God. That would be the worst thing."

The third faculty member we interviewed (whom we'll call C) had tenure at the college and had been teaching there for more than ten years. In 2001 C and a colleague had volunteered to come in every day during the summer to score essays "because we sort of knew what was coming." C liked the old system because in reading the essays "[w]e did also spot problems, issues. It felt appropriate for the faculty to know ahead of time about students' work, what we needed to think about. I liked it for that reason." C, who was on the college's Outcomes Committee, described their opposition to using any sentence-skills test, but particularly WritePlacer *Plus*, as an outcomes test for Composition 102, a course in responding to literature. After concerted opposition, the use of WritePlacer *Plus* as an exit test has been abandoned but, C thinks, chiefly because of its cost, not because of its evident lack of fit with the curriculum being taught. C objected to using WritePlacer *Plus* even for placement purposes because, as C said, "It undermines the philosophy I have inherited about the nature of writing—that you write to people. That's what is important to me. So I just feel that it sets up a false premise. I am not very eloquent here—but in very human terms, it is just not right."

And C went on to give an example of a case in which one of her students had produced writing that, if it were read by human beings, might bring about social change.

Just the other day a student said to me, “Is this really important?” He’s an American Indian, writing about different images that still persist about Native Americans—he’s gotten involved in the Nipmunk Nation—there’s a lot going on in his essay—he’s a very eloquent writer. He asked me, “Does this really matter? You write all this stuff, and will it change anything?” I said, “Of course, . . . because you will be affecting other human beings.” He’s going to be assessed by computer? That’s going to turn him off to the idea that you can actually connect to a human audience.

In addition to the interviews with faculty and administrators, we observed two test sessions and interviewed ten students immediately after they finished the placement testing. The test sessions were held in the Testing and Advising Center, the office in charge of all testing. At the test sessions, students were taking arithmetic, elementary algebra, reading comprehension, and the writing-sample tests, all on computers. Students had preregistered for the session, with each session open to twenty-three students. The room in which they took their exams was quiet and well lit, with the computers arranged around the exterior of the room, with two rows facing each other up the middle. On the walls hung motivational posters.

The Testing and Advising Center employee who explained the testing to students was friendly and took care both to explain the testing and to encourage students to do their best and trust in their abilities. She stressed that the tests were for placement, not admissions, and that there was no such thing as a good or bad score. The purpose was to select the right class for each of them. The writing test was explained as a forty-five-minute timed essay to test such writing skills as “spelling, grammar, and how to organize your thoughts. . . . The more you write the better. You want to make a really good argument” (see figure 1 for the prompt that was used).

Although students were writing on computers, no mention was made of who or what would evaluate their essays. The center employees were also very accommodating: so for instance, if students had difficulty with typing, they had the option of writing their essay by hand and having it typed in by someone else.

We also introduced ourselves to the students, explaining that with their consent, we would like to interview a few of them briefly. We stated our purpose as studying the use of the computer writing-placement

FIGURE 1*Placement Question for which Students Were to Write Their Essay*

Some schools are considering a move to year-round schooling. This would change the current school schedule from a nine month to a twelve month academic school year. The current school calendar that includes a break for the entire summer would be replaced by a schedule of attendance year round, with several two to three week breaks for students during the year.

Some people argue that year-round schooling benefits students and improves student learning. Others argue that having students attend school all year can have a negative effect on students and their lives outside of school.

Write an essay for a classroom instructor in which you take a position on whether or not schools should move to a year round schedule. Be sure to defend your position with logical arguments and appropriate examples. (cpts.accuplacer.com/writerplacer/writerplacer.options.jsp)

system, with our “primary interest being understanding your experiences with writing the essay. . . . Our hope is that the findings will be helpful to academic testing people and teachers as they plan and implement writing tests.” We made clear that their decision whether to be interviewed or not would in no way affect their essay rating. When students completed their tests, one of the center employees asked if they would be willing to do the interview. If they said yes, they were brought to us. The center graciously provided coffee mugs to those who completed the interviews.

When we interviewed the students, then, they had just completed their testing and received their results but had not yet spoken with their advisors. As an overview, here’s what they said:

- Seven of the ten were used to using computers. Three were not, and two of these wrote their placement essays by hand and had the center’s staff type them in to the computer to be computer scored.
- Two of the ten realized that their writing was going to be scored by computer; eight did not.
- One wrote to a specific audience (his mother); eight named a general audience (“someone smart,” “the college,” “the instructors”); and one, who said that she knew the computer was scoring her essay, said that she imagined her English teacher was reading the piece anyhow.
- Four felt that the computer would be more fair than a human reader; the rest did not know or said that it depended on the programming. Six would have preferred that their essay be read by people; two preferred the computer; and two were unsure.

- All ten believed that a teacher would be reading their writing in their college courses, and all ten preferred that.
- Most believed that the computer can tally only surface features, although three, when shown the descriptors for a “7,” thought that the computer could judge how well the writing responded to aspects of the rhetorical situation: audience and purpose. The other seven did not (see figure 2).

In the following excerpts from the interviews, the students speak to important issues. Do they write differently to machines? Do they prefer to write to people or machines? Do they see the computer as a “fair” reader of their writing? Do they expect that computers will be reading their writing in college? And if so, what do they have to say about this possibility?

One student, who volunteered that he preferred the computer to a teacher as an evaluator of his writing, elaborated on this statement, giving his reasons for his preference: “I have nothing wrong with a computer grading my paper. I don’t have any problems with it. Then you don’t have to worry about, like, your teacher and that idea, you know—sometimes a reader . . . what if he really didn’t like you? If a computer does it, it would be fair to everybody?” Asked whether he expected teachers or computers to be reading his writing at the college, this student responded, “I have no idea. To tell you the truth, this was one of the first times I’ve been in a classroom and seen nothing but computers. I mean, when I went to school, it was like one or maybe two computers in a room. . . . I was like, excited—wait until my kids go to school! Jeez, they might not even have teachers!” He laughed. Later in the same interview he elaborated: “I prefer a teacher, but I know my kids are probably going to say, ‘We want a computer,’ you know. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

When asked if the computer-scoring program would be “fair,” he responded, “I don’t know what to say on that, because I don’t know. . . . I guess it would be the person who programmed it. There’s got to be someone who programs it; maybe it should be a male and a female come to an idea to grade that or make the program. . . . The way I look at it, if somebody’s got to make a program, if it’s just one person, say it was a male, I think that it may be gendered slightly, but if it was a male and female working together, I think you get more . . . the best of both worlds.”

A second student, when asked, “Does it matter to you whether your writing will be read by teachers or computers?” responded, “It might. I don’t know. Depends on my grades. If they come out fine, I’m not

FIGURE 2*WritePlacer Plus Score Descriptor for a Rating of 7 on a Scale of 2 to 12*

A restricted writing sample that only partially communicates a message to the specified audience. The purpose may be evident but only partially formed. Focus on the main idea is only partially evident. The main idea is only partially developed with limited supporting details. While there is some evidence of control in the use of mechanical conventions such as sentence structure, usage, spelling and punctuation, some distracting errors may be present. (cps.accuplacer.com/writeplacer/writeplacer.options.jsp)

going to argue about it. But if they are low, then of course I will bring it to their attention.”

Interviewer: Which you could do with teachers but not the computer?

Student: You'd have to bring it up with the teacher and have them override the grade. You'd have to force the interaction back on the teacher. . . . I don't see how the computer could grade you on a paper you write from scratch, with no predefined guidelines, about a subject.

Interviewer: But what if it was in chemistry?

Student: If they gave you a subject, then they could create these conditions they could test you against. But if they just say “Write whatever you want, about whatever” and give it to you, how can they test that?

Told that her writing was going to be computer scored, a third student was surprised—“That's really odd—I had no idea—my goodness, I suppose if I had known this before I'd written it things might have been—my thought process might have been different.”

Interviewer: What do you think the difference might have been?

Student: I don't know. I just know that deep down somewhere in my brain I would have been thinking, “I'm writing this to a computer, I'm not writing this to a teacher” or—that's strange, that's really odd.

Interviewer: Would you feel different or better if a faculty person read this?

Student: Is it going to give you feedback? When I get the scores, am I going to have some feedback? No. I don't know. I just think that if I'd known this ahead of time, just knowing this might have created some different—in the way I'm doing it—just different.

Interviewer: When you took the math test did you imagine that a computer was going to read that?

Student: No. Just because it's multiple choice.

Interviewer: But when you sat down to write an essay, that felt different?

Student: Yes, I'm assuming that someone is going to be reading this thoroughly and, you know, thinking about what you wrote, and not really—I mean I know the computer is smart, but I'm not thinking of them as thinking about what I'm writing as the way a human would think about what I'm writing.

One final excerpt. A fourth student, when asked, "Would you be okay about having a computer score your writing in college?" responded: "I think it would be something I'd have to get used to. After a while, I don't think it would bother me any more."

Interviewer: Could you expand on that at all? What would it mean "to get used to"?

Student: I mean, I've never had a computer grade any of my writings before. Obviously multiple-choice tests—I can understand that because there's only one answer. But writing is just—there is no boundaries for it, and a computer kind of puts limits to that. But I think that if that is the way it was, I would get used to a new style of writing, not just to please the computer, but just to start off with—if that's all that there was there.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

So where does this leave us? Given this study of an institution that has adopted WritePlacer *Plus* as a placement tool, what has happened to our original concerns, voiced in our *College English* article in 2001? At that time, as you remember, we were concerned about the cost of computer-scored writing, of how computer-scored placement testing removes faculty from the placement process, and how writing to a computer changes, even cancels, the inherent nature of writing as a meaning-making and rhetorical activity.

First, our initial concern about cost seems not to be a factor at Valley College, although we know that the people-scored placement process at our home institution is cheaper than WritePlacer *Plus* would be for us. According to the testing program administrator at Valley College, the Testing and Advising Center generates enough money from such fee-based tests as CLEP to cover the costs of WritePlacer *Plus*. At Valley College, it appears that WritePlacer *Plus* meets the school's need for a time- and cost-efficient means of evaluating a writing sample and placing students, a means that administrators believe to be as accurate as using faculty readers. Viewing placement as a relatively low-stakes

assessment, the test administrator said, “Placement is just a quick screening,” and of WritePlacer *Plus*, “as a filter, it’s a great filter.” Interestingly, she recognizes the limits of most all placement testing. Reflecting on self-placement as an alternative to testing, she commented, “I personally am all for it. . . . I don’t know where this huge concern for placement came from. Driven by test companies looking for a market or faculty saying students are not college ready.”

Second, our initial concern about removing faculty from the placement process is supported by our study. Administrators and faculty at Valley College agree that having faculty read placement essays gives faculty a sense of their students and their writing. In the view of two of the faculty and one of the administrators, this reading of placement essays has had an important impact on curriculum, in that it gives the faculty an early indication of the issues and skills that their students bring with them to the college. Two of the faculty also spoke to the professional development value of sessions in which they came together to develop scoring rubrics and to discuss how they apply those rubrics to specific essays. In these meetings there was informal talk about the teaching of writing, something that faculty valued and felt the loss of under the new dispensation.

Third, our concern about the ways in which computer scoring of writing constructs the act of writing was supported by the study. The dean and two of the faculty—all graduate-trained experts in English and experienced teachers of writing—expressed reservations about how automated essay scoring constructs writing. Because of this new construction of writing, they were not in favor of extending the use of automated essay scoring to tutoring or instruction. Reflecting on the nature of automated essay scoring, the dean said, “[Y]our mind, the way in which it organizes language, is evaluated by a machine.” He explained that he wants “experienced human beings, with full cognitive faculties, to see the essay.” Still, he continued, while he does not like the idea that “some machine is counting words, paragraphs—for this task, gross placement, it works! It asks the question, ‘Is this student in the weakest 30 percent?’” Given his reservations, though, it is not surprising that he says he would not support using an automated essay program for tutoring purposes. Echoing the dean’s concerns about the incompatibility of automated essay scoring with writing, one of the faculty explained, “It undermines the philosophy I have inherited about the nature of writing—that you write to people.”

That philosophy or belief is not just artificial school-taught theory; it is fundamental to the nature of writing, as all ten of the students also sensed

in stating their preference for having teachers evaluate their writing in their courses at the college. Recall that one of them said that if she had known that a computer was “reading” her writing, “I just know that deep down somewhere in my brain, I would have been thinking, ‘I’m writing this to a computer, I’m not writing this to a teacher’ or—that’s strange, that’s really odd.” Another: “I know that a computer is smart, but I’m not thinking of them as thinking about what I’m writing as the way a human would think about what I’m writing.” And that is precisely the problem when automated essay scoring moves from assessment to instruction.

We bring up these concerns about instruction because the companies marketing automated essay-scoring programs are making the move into instructional settings. In marketing IntelliMetric, the engine for WritePlacer *Plus*, Vantage claims that it provides “high quality, accurate electronic essay scoring” and “authentic assessment” (2004a). As a field, we would be hard pressed to argue that mass placement testing, even with human readers, is “authentic,” but we should be very concerned with the move into instructional settings. Programs like MY Access!, Elements of Language, and Criterion promise to assist teachers with the “burdens” of providing feedback to student writing, of assessing in relation to externally established norms, and of record keeping. But what are we teaching students if a computer rubric is their initial target when writing, a target that will evaluate formal criteria but not respond to what a student is saying or the purpose he or she is trying to accomplish, that will not be able to answer the Native American student’s question, “Does this really matter?” In an insightful critique of Criterion and automated scoring in general, Julie Cheville (2004) writes: “Ultimately, automated scoring technologies scan to count and humans beings write to make meaning. To be effective, writers need the opportunity to share their purposes and plans with readers, who, in turn, assume an appropriate stance and read critically. The possibilities available to writers depend on the capacity of readers to perceive what works and to imagine what might work better. Writers are only as sophisticated as the readers they have encountered in their literate lives” (51).

Here Cheville is pointing to the consequential basis of validity, arguing that if one writes to computers, a consequence will be that one will be less prepared to write to people. Students in our study anticipated this consequence as well. As one commented, “I would get used to a new style of writing, not just to please the computer, but just to start off with—if that’s all that there was there.” This student also raises, for us, the issue of class and access to education. Will it be the case for

this student that “that’s all that there was there”? The site of our study was a two-year college, whose students are largely part-time, seeking job-related credentialing. From our review of the Web sites advertising these products, it appears that our research site is characteristic of the institutions that have adopted computer-scored placement services. On the list of institutions using WritePlacer *Plus* or Criterion there is no Harvard or Princeton, no Williams or Oberlin or Amherst. There is, however, Truckee Meadows Community College, Camden County Community College, University College of the Cariboo, the University of South Florida, Northern Arizona University, and Valley College. The distribution of this product suggests to us an extension of the social and economic stratification that has been such a feature of the past decade: the wealthy and connected learn to write to make meaning and to achieve their rhetorical purposes; the poor and unconnected learn to write to scoring engines.

We don’t think that this two-class system is the conscious aim of our institutions or of the people who administer and teach in them. But it may be the result of incremental decisions—to use computers to score placement essays, and then to give feedback to writers in writing centers, and then to use them to read exit exams for “value added,” and then to grade papers in a large lecture course—each decision not made in a vacuum but in an atmosphere created by heavy teaching loads, underfunded public institutions, heavy marketing, and claims of “efficiency” and “authenticity.”

Placement essays, as we have said, may already be an a-rhetorical, somewhat mechanical writing situation. William L. Smith (1993) has described a placement-testing system that draws on teachers’ expertise of the courses in the curriculum, but most often placement essays are read in holistic reading sessions by readers who have been “normed” against scoring rubrics and made, arguably, into something like reading machines. So we may want to grant that placement by machine is not that much worse—more a-rhetorical, more impersonal—than placement by readers normed by a holistic scoring training session. But even as we grant this, we need to listen to the faculty and administrators at Valley College, who, in different degrees, felt that the “washback” from the faculty placement readings into the curriculum was educationally valuable. Certainly we need to resist the extension of computer-scored writing beyond placement and into teaching situations. Our study leads us to support the CCCC “Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” (Conference on College

Composition and Communication Committee 2004): “Because all writing is social, all writing should have human readers, regardless of the purpose of the writing” (789).

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENTS

Background Information

1. Female_____ or Male_____
2. Age: 18–22_____ 23–35_____ over 35_____
3. When were you last in school?
4. When did you last take an English class?

WritePlacer Plus

5. What was it like to write your placement essay online?
6. Who did you think you were writing to when you wrote this essay? (Did you feel that you were writing to a person or a computer?)
7. Do you think that the computer program will be fair to you in evaluating your essay for placement? (Do you think a person would be fairer?) (If given a choice, would you prefer to have a person or the computer program evaluate your writing, or doesn't it matter? Why?)
8. Do you expect that here at school your writing will generally be read by your teachers or a computer program? (Does it matter to you whether your teacher or a program reads your writing? Why?)
9. What do you think the computer program is reading for when it evaluates your writing? That is, what aspects of your writing do you think it's considering when evaluating it? (Do you think a computer looks for different things when evaluating your writing for placement than a person would?)

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FACULTY

(Note: we used substantially the same questions for the interviews with the two administrators.)

Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching at this school?
2. Have you read placement essays here in the past? If not here, elsewhere?
3. Why did this school decide to shift to using a computer program to evaluate students' placement essays? (Probe to get a sense of the history of this decision.)

WritePlacer Plus

4. Have you tried WritePlacer *Plus* yourself? If so, what was it like to write an essay online to be evaluated by a computer program?
5. If yes to #4: who did you think you were writing to when you wrote this essay? (Did you feel that you were writing to a person or a computer?)
6. Are you generally satisfied with the writing-placement process that includes WritePlacer *Plus*? (Do you think it is a fair way of evaluating students' writing for placement?) (If given a choice, would you prefer to have a person or the computer program evaluate students' placement essays, or doesn't it matter? Why?)
7. What do you think the computer program is reading for when it evaluates your writing? That is, what aspects of your writing do you think it's considering when evaluating it? (Do you think a computer looks for different things when evaluating your writing for placement than a person would?)
8. What's the best thing about WritePlacer *Plus*?
9. What's the worst thing about it?
10. Do you feel there's a connection between the placement system with WritePlacer *Plus* and the curriculum? If yes, what is it? If no, why not? (Probe to get a sense of the nature of this connection or lack thereof and the import of that.)