



Issues in transitioning from the traditional blue-book to computer-based writing assessment

Nathaniel J. Hunsu*

Writing Assessment Program, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-4530, USA

Abstract

With the increasing popularity of computers in learning and instruction, it is evident that students are no longer doing much pen-and-paper writing in the classroom. Since most academic work is done on computers, handwriting any piece of academic work is tacitly becoming foreign to students. As such, their placement writing assessments, too, should be administered on computers. However, the decision to transition from the traditional blue book to computer-based writing assessment requires a careful understanding of issues that affect students and raters and that college writing programs must be quipped to manage. This article discusses such critical issues necessary for making informed transitioning and suggests ways to ensure tests administered in both modes are comparable. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Most U.S. colleges and universities have established requirements for freshmen entering into first-year composition courses and have developed some sort of placement mechanism for placing students into appropriate writing courses to prepare them for writing in their major disciplines. Variants include the use of students' scores in the writing components of such standardized tests as the SAT/ACT, locally developed placement tests (handwritten or taken online), and self-placements. A recent survey of the writing programs of member institutions listed on the website of the Association of American Universities (AAU) revealed that about 60% of universities rely on a system to place students into first-year composition courses (2012). While many of these do first-year composition placement based on SAT/ACT scores, only a few rely exclusively on such standardized tests for composition placement purposes. Most of them administer locally developed writing tests for international students, as well as for students whose performances are low on the SAT. Some of these schools, however, exclusively use unstandardized writing tests developed by the school to determine students' placement into writing courses. It appears that even schools that use scores from the SAT/ACT rely on samples of at least some, if not all, students' writings to make their placement decision. Some administrators require students to submit samples of past writings or take an impromptu placement writing test (i.e., blue-book exams).

While samples of students' writing remains the only tangible way to assess writing ability, presentation formats of writing samples have evolved considerably with the infusion of technology with learning. Technology has changed the landscape considerably. From desktops to laptops and now iPads, it is needless to say that students no longer do extensive handwriting. Most instructors require academic work to be word-processed rather than handwritten (Alexander, Bartlett, Truell, & Ouwenga, 2001; Wolfe, Bolton, Feltovinch, & Niday, 1996). With more states deemphasizing learning

* Tel.: +1 509 335 3459.

E-mail address: nat.hunsu@wsu.edu

handwriting in the elementary language arts curriculum, it is certain that handwriting skill is destined to lose its place for the more desired typing skill.

Since most students in the United States work with computers (DeBell & Chapman, 2006), handwriting any piece of academic work is becoming foreign. It seems instinctive that their placement writing assessments, too, should be administered on computers; at least it is intuitive to think that the construct validity of handwritten assessments for a lot of students seem compromised. It may be suggested that placement examinations, which are meant to demonstrate writing abilities, might be measuring psychomotor skills and psychological constructs, too, as a result of the discomfort that ensues under timed examination conditions for students who find no comfort in handwriting. In fact, H.K. Lee (2004) reported that habitual “typers” expressed embarrassment and frustration when required to handwrite these placement examinations. Such frustrations might confound the construct writing tests are poised to measure and dampen students’ confidence about the test, especially students with poor penmanship.

To address the situation, some administrators of writing assessment now offer computer-based impromptu writing tasks. While others have not made this transition for varied reasons, it is important to critically examine the need for migrating from a pen-and-paper to computer-based writing assessment, especially for high stake purposes such as freshmen placement writing assessments. This article makes a case for writing programs that still administer handwritten placement examinations to strongly consider transitioning from handwritten tests to computer-based impromptu writing placement examinations. It will examine factors that affect students’ performance on computer-administered writing tests and how raters’ judgments of students’ written products are affected by the mode in which they are presented. Additionally, it will suggest how to assuage these effects, as well as the side effects of transitioning to computer-based assessment for those students with minimal typing skill.

1. The need for transitioning

Just over a few decades ago, the use of computers in assessing students’ essays in direct placement writing assessments was less desirable, particularly because computers were not widely used, and their use would introduce construct irrelevant variants into the assessment of students’ writing (Maulan, 2004). Predicting the future role of computers in writing assessments, Donald Powers, Mary Fowles, Marisa Farnum, and Paul Ramsey (1994) reflected that as computer usage becomes more common in learning and assessment, “familiarity and comfort with computers will undoubtedly become a less important issue in assessment” than they have been in the past (p. 220). Computers are more common in educational settings today, and their proliferation in U.S. schools has defied the restraints of gender, ethnicity, and the level of education. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported that at least 89% of fourth graders who took the NAEP reading assessment in 2009 reported they have access to computers at home, and 91% have access to computers in school for reading and language arts activities (NCES, 2011). These findings, and other data on computer usage, suggest that students begin to use computers at an early age and go on in life using computers on many fronts. In light of this research, it is irrefutable that computers have become the way to learn, and studies on the role of technology in learning concur that computers facilitate teaching, facilitate the writing process, and motivate students to write by providing them with useful revision tools, thus enhancing students’ written products (Li, 2006; Wolfe et al., 1996).

Some studies have raised concerns that administering students’ writing assessments on computers really measures more constructs than are required in writing assessment (Maulan, 2004; McDonald, 2002). However, the pervasion of computers in schools reverses the concerns educators and assessors once had about the use of computers in writing assessment. With computers being extensively used for most students’ writing, projects, and assignments (Alexander et al., 2001), many students have become adept computer users. This situation calls researchers to question the fairness and validity of results of writing assessments of students who are adroit computer users constrained to handwrite their essays (Way, Davis, & Strain-Seymour, 2008; Lee, 2004; Russell & Haney, 1997). Having students who are so dependent on typing to handwrite, especially under timed writing conditions, may indeed be confounding their writing ability with other abilities. Put another way, is the system punishing students for neglecting their handwriting practices? Samuel Messick (1994) noted that for assessments to remain authentic, test administrators must provide students with the same tasks, contexts, time, and resources that parallel those they use in the real world. In fact, several studies have found that constraining students who are accustomed to writing with a computer to handwrite their essays undermines their productivity (Way et al., 2008; Russell & Plati, 2001; Russell & Haney, 1997).

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