

Advising and Student Empowerment A Response to: Jennifer Maloy's "A Tale of Two Placements: Influences of ESL Designation on the Identities of Two Linguistic Minority Community College Students" (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016)

Neil Meyer*

LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York

Jennifer Maloy's article "A Tale of Two Placements: Influences of ESL Designation on the Identities of Two Linguistic Minority Community College Students" analyzes how the advising and placement of ESL students needing remediation affects how students form their college identities. She tells the stories of two students, Joyce and Jan, who placed into English as a second language (ESL) and Native English speaker (NES) remediation respectively. Though both were "Generation 1.5" students deemed in need of remediation based on a placement exam, each was sent to a different course housed in separate departments. That decision affected their "writerly identities," as Maloy thoughtfully analyzes.

The decisions Joyce and Jan subsequently made happened within the fraught world of community college remediation and departmental structures. These students were constructing identities in programs with their own identity crises. Like many, my home institution, LaGuardia Community College, offers developmental courses in both our English department and our English Language and Acquisition (ELA) department. And, like many other community colleges with our uniquely diverse student population, that distinction can prove murky. The line separating students sent to our respective programs does not always seem clear, and that lack of clarity can affect how we can best work with these students. As one potential solution, we have begun to hold more regular workshops between faculty in the English and ELA departments to share knowledge and resources and to begin to see the common ground of the work done in our programs. Communicating more regularly between departments is one modest way to move beyond the sometimes artificial binaries that separate our programs—and therefore our students.

Information sharing is an essential first step, but moving beyond that can be problematic. Programs that serve developmental writers and ESL students are often marginalized and under-resourced, making change and innovation a serious challenge. Shapiro (2011) addresses this problem in the context of one school, "Northern Green University," but faculty and departments across the country tell similar stories. This is an issue about the precarious status of our work, and the limited resources offered in programs to implement rigorous or meaningful transformation.

But one area of recent innovation—placement—offers some potential for positive change. Student Joyce seemed stigmatized by her ESL distinction, a problem Kenner (2016) and others have discussed. But student Jan was given the choice of either an ESL or NES course, and made her decision to enter an NES developmental writing course, based on her perceived needs. Maloy does not say whether this was "directed self-placement" (DSP), but the ability to choose for herself seems to have had a positive effect

on Jan's college identity construction. Directed self-placement means placement systems where students make informed, guided decisions in their course selection. Advisors help students find the coursework best suited to their needs, without limits placed by standardized testing or cut-score placement. Student empowerment is thus a key feature of DSP (Blakeslee, Harvey & Reynolds, 2013) and being able to choose between ESL and NES courses appears to have been empowering for Jan. DSP is one way to promote the "informed decision making" that Kibler, Bunch, and Endris (2011) believe is necessary for U.S.-educated language-minority (US-LM) students and offers students a chance to take positive control over the trajectory of their educations.

Writing placement in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, of which LaGuardia Community College is a part, is still overwhelmingly reliant on the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW). The same is true for exit from remediation, where students must pass the CATW exam in order to enter into credit-bearing composition courses. But recently, the CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education recommended (a) ending the "do-or-die" status of an exit exam and (b) that in the near future the review of an exit from developmental writing courses will count the CATW as only one part of a students' overall course grade. These changes are in line with research from the Community College Research Center (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Looking at these changes alongside Maloy's article reveals an opportunity for my campus and the larger CUNY system to consider. As we rethink the role of standardized testing for exiting programs, we can rethink the role of testing for placement as well. Maloy shows how labels like "ESL" and "remedial" affect students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities to succeed in college, especially when those labels are imposed on students. Giving students more information, guidance, and freedom as they consider developmental coursework can mitigate the frustration and disappointment that both Joyce and Jan expressed with their experiences.

References

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*Corresponding author: nmeyer@lagccunyu.edu