

Accommodating the Consumer-Student



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Abstract: Increasingly, students come to the university with a consumer mentality, which gives students a sense that they are entitled to negotiate their student positions within the university and the classroom. This article, using Directed Self-Placement as a sort of case study, considers the role student-centered assessments and pedagogies play in perpetuating this consumer role and theorizes that we are framing them in a way that makes us complicit. The article addresses questions about what to do as education becomes more consumer driven. What is a WPA—caught between concerns about good pedagogy and pressures from the administration to recruit and retain students—to do when faced with students who want to negotiate their positions in the first-year composition curriculum? And, how do we negotiate ourselves back into a position in which assessment standards and rigor are paramount, even in a consumer world?

For the past several years, as director of writing assessment (a position as close to a writing program administrator as my university currently has), I've coordinated the efforts to place incoming freshmen into classes in our first-year writing sequence. Until recently, this entailed reading placement essays, norming faculty from across campus, breaking the ties when disagreements about placements occurred, and increasingly, dealing with students and parents who called to complain about placement decisions. I've become quite adept at explaining these placements, negotiating retakes, and soothing the egos of students from a generation who, as many scholars writing about them have argued, have always been told they're special. I'm prepared to deal with these conversations, to demonstrate to a student why the course she's been placed in is really the best and most appropriate course. What I haven't been prepared for is the move from arguing about placement results to protesting the placement test in the first place. Recently, students have begun to use the placement test process as a bargaining chip. They call to tell me—or someone in the Admissions Office—that they don't want to take the placement test, that school X isn't making them take placements tests, and that if our university persists in requiring these tests, they're going to go elsewhere. In this economy, that's a powerful statement. Students are now shopping around for deals in education the same way consumers shop around for deals on televisions or cell phones. This consumer mentality isn't new. What is new is the power the consumer currently has in the educational market; universities, especially private universities like mine, are now, more than ever, working hard to sell themselves in a competitive market. While the majority of higher education may still appear to work from a different model, the rhetoric of attracting students, donors, and national reputation is steeped in the language of consumerism. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the recruiting and admissions processes, where we openly talk about students as customers.

In business, the customer is always right, an adage counter-intuitive to the way higher education—which assumes we have much to teach and students have much to learn—positions itself. But higher education is a competitive market, one in which many colleges and universities are struggling, at times, to operate in the black. The business model says one way to compete is to attract more, and more affluent, customers. And in business, the way to attract customers, especially when you can't slash prices (and, let's face it, tuition reduction isn't where this market is headed) is to give the customer what she wants. We've seen this in a myriad of ways: private dorm rooms have become more standard, amenities such as full kitchens have been added to these private dorm rooms, state-of-the-art gyms and aquatic centers have been added to residential buildings, and laundry services and dry cleaning are offered. We are now catering, literally, to college students. But what happens when that catering moves from dorm life to academic life? What happens when that consumer mentality enters the classroom in full force, when, because the customer is always right, everything is open for negotiation?

In this article, I want to argue that student-centered pedagogical practices such as directed self-placement (DSP) may prove to be a good solution to this problem as they work with our best practices while giving students a sense of efficacy and choice. However, I also want to reexamine and question these practices through the lens of consumerism in order to think about potential pitfalls they may lead us to. My fear is that we've let the consumer into the classroom. We need to think about how to reframe our practices so they improve our pedagogy and address the needs of students, not the customer.

Consumer Rhetoric at the University and in the Classroom

This consumer mentality isn't new—it isn't even new to think about its place in the classroom. The rhetoric of the student-consumer has its roots in the 1970s (if not earlier) when the consumer-student was written about—not for the first time, but certainly with much more breadth than ever before—in a legal context. Cases of students suing their universities for false advertising or breach of contract began to pop up and lawyers began to argue that the consumer, i.e. the student, needed to be protected in the same way customers of retail businesses are.^[1] As Sandra Willet writes:

In the education marketplace, the student is the seeker of knowledge of skills and purchases education from a supplier to meet his needs. The student is therefore the consumer of educational services. [. . .] Since the student is the consumer of educational services, he is, like the consumer in the traditional marketplace, a critical participant in the buying of education. The abuses which substantiate the need for consumer protection hit the student consumer primarily and directly. (35-36)

In the 1970s, there was a real concern that higher education, largely unregulated, was taking advantage of students with bait-and-switch practices that took money for a “product” that was never delivered. This led to several federal and congressional actions that created consumer-protection for students^[2] and in doing so, introduced consumer rhetoric into the academy. Certainly, the kind of oversight introduced was necessary at the time, but one result was that it created a new kind of dialogue, one that has some serious ramifications for pedagogy today.

The rhetoric of consumerism has had a place in higher education for a while and is now entrenched in the dialogue we have with students. As Peter Cookson, Jr. argues in *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education*, the market metaphor has become a predominant one in the conversation about education. Terms of consumerism “dominate public discourse” about education (100) and are a real part of the student discussion. And, Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, in “On the Uses of Liberal Education, I: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students; II: As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor,” points out that the notion of the student-consumer is firmly seeded in our classes:

Students can [. . .] float in and out of classes during the first two weeks of each term without making any commitment. The common name for the time span—shopping period—speaks volumes about the consumer mentality that's now in play. Usually, too, the kids can drop courses up until the last month with only an innocuous “W” on their transcripts. Does a course look too challenging? No problem. Take it pass-fail. A happy consumer is, by definition, one with multiple options, one who can always have what he wants. And, since a course is something the students and their parents have bought and paid for, why can't they do with it pretty much as they please? (44)

This discussion framing the student as consumer most notably has been taken up in conversations about the course evaluation process, a line of inquiry that demonstrates that education is adaptable to student whims. One result, Edmundson argues, is that we've become primarily entertainers in the classroom. A good evaluation of course and professor often includes comments about how enjoyable the material was or how funny the professor is and, often, neglects to say that the course was challenging or mention what was actually learned. These evaluations suggest, according to Edmundson, that “university culture, like American culture writ large, is [. . .] ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using of goods and images” (40). In other words, what many of our students want is to be entertained while they're spoon-fed the material we want them to learn. They want us metaphorically to tap-dance in front of them while they steadfastly imbibe material without engaging with it. While I'm not sure I agree with Edmundson that students prefer easy classes and don't want to be challenged (I've seen evaluations that criticize professors for making the class too simple), I do agree that students' evaluations suggest they want to be entertained while they're learning and the value placed on that entertainment is at a premium. This goes against what most of us believe is the true purpose of education, but the practical fact of it is that these student evaluations go into our tenure and promotion review files, are used by administrators to make decisions about our professional futures—and so, in response to student demand for entertainment inside the classroom as well as out, we do the dance if only to attract a customer base to our classes because our jobs depend on it.

The livelihood of our universities depends on it as well. Hence, we've stepped up recruitment: students who perform remotely well on the SAT can expect to receive hundreds of colorful brochures from colleges and universities touting their schools. Potential students are courted by recruiters sent out around the country to make promises about what University X can deliver. In *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism*, David Riesman recounts a story from one recruiter—one of 50 targeting TWO midyear graduates from

an Ohio high school: “He [the recruiter] spoke of his uncomfortable sense of how these students must feel, courted in an indiscriminate way by such a large contingent of disparate institutions” (111). Riesman focuses some of his discussion on the overwhelming nature of the recruitment and admissions process; he argues that the aggressive market confuses students and sometimes causes them to make inappropriate choices about their education. Faced with too many options, students can be enticed to schools that are wrong for them. But, Riesman was also making this argument in the 1980s. More than 25 years later, I would argue that most students and their parents have learned to manipulate the competitive market. They’ve become savvy consumers, no longer overwhelmingly impressed by flashy brochures and enthusiastic recruiters, or even DVDs and school paraphernalia, because those trappings have become the norm. Through aggressive marketing, we’ve trained potential students to be savvy customers. Students are free to shop—and free to ask what universities are going to do to get their business.

Individualized Education

More and more, students expect that universities are going to be flexible, are going to tailor admissions processes, living conditions, curriculum, and major requirements to the individual. In *Generation Me*, just one of many books that discuss the new millennium generation, Jean Twenge asserts that this generation of college students is more concerned with the self and has a more inflated sense of self-worth than any previous generation. Twenge argues that primary and secondary schools are as much about promoting self-esteem as they are education, giving rise to a generation of college students who are more confident in themselves, with less evidence of accomplishment—especially academic achievement—than ever before. In 2006, more than 300,000 elementary schools listed building self-esteem as part of their mission statements (56). At least 2/3 of teachers and school counselors believe that to promote self-esteem means “providing more unconditional validation of students based on who they are rather than how they perform or behave” (57). In other words, students are encouraged to be themselves and praised for the effort of being individual—no matter how successful that individual actually is. In fact, Twenge argues, school curricula and teaching philosophies are willing to sacrifice learning for the sake of individuality, resulting in “a movement against ‘criticizing’ children too much” (61). Primary and secondary public and private education have changed to create and accommodate a generation of students who have been raised to believe they’re special. It’s no surprise, then, that when students enter our universities, they balk against processes that, as David Blakesley argues, seek to normalize and socialize them and, in the process, remove a sense of individuality:

On the one hand, placement itself is the most social of acts whereby individuals accommodate themselves to the values and judgment of the group with which they identify or aspire to join, all in the interest of social harmony. On the other hand, individuals sacrifice some aspect of individual responsibility or identity in making such accommodations, whether these accommodations are prompted by self-knowledge or by the institution that has the power to confer such group identity. (31-32)

The current generation of students doesn’t want to be normalized, resists being treated as part of a herd indistinguishable from one another. The college application process itself asks students to distinguish themselves from one another, to make themselves stand out from the crowd. It’s no surprise that these same students want to continue to be considered as individuals once they set foot on our campuses, especially when both the education system and the marketplace have spent much of their lives training them to see themselves as such.

As Blakesley points out, however, traditional placement processes remove that sense of individuality by placing students into limited categories determined by a university’s curriculum. In the case of first-year composition, students are often limited to two or three categories, depending on the first-year sequence of courses. Placement tests themselves give students little chance to demonstrate their individuality, as they tend to ask students to respond to the same question or set of questions. A one-size-fits-all method of placement in which students are provided little or no choice robs them of the sense of self-determination and individuality they’ve come to expect.

Businesses, at least in our students’ lifetimes, have always marketed this belief that the individual should be prized and catered to: Burger King wants you to have your burger your way; banks all over the country promise financial solutions as individual as you are. We can customize our electronics with individual ring tones, screen savers, carrying cases, etc. all designed to show, through our possessions, what makes us unique. Starbucks has so many add-on options that even coffee can be uniquely customized so that, though we all have the same cup, the marks on the side that tell us what’s in it speak volumes about the individual carrying it.

Universities are equally complicit. They too have jumped on the individuality bandwagon. Indiana University, for example, launched a television campaign in the late 1990s that highlighted individual students—in a series of just

four commercials, more than 200 images of individual students were shown. The commercial campaign was designed to stress not only the benefits of the Indiana University system but also the space for the individual in that system. Adult and evening programs attract students by promising to tailor the curriculum to their unique goals and individual needs. For-profit schools like Strayer University promise “Programs you want, on campus or online, at times that work for you” in order to create a schedule that fits your life, and state and private universities are following suit in order to compete. My own university, a relatively small, liberal arts school, writes on its page for prospective students that “We’re small. We’re friendly. We focus on the individual.” And my university is not alone; schools promising individualized educations abound in the United States. Marshall’s mission statement says, “Marshall University is a multi-campus public university providing innovative undergraduate and graduate education that contributes to the development of society and the individual.” Xavier University lists its educational goals “[w]ith attention to the student as an individual.” I cite these schools not because they are unique, but because they were on the first page of my Google search. But, my quick search on Google yielded countless examples of mission statements from both public and private universities that stress the individual. The individual identity is at a premium right now—recognizing the individual is a merchandizing strategy and consumers want to know that in a mass-produced world, they stand out. The student-consumer is no different.

So, it comes as no real surprise that students (and their parents), who must have increasingly noticed that universities are vying for their business, want to bargain for the best deal just as they would with any other big purchase. Apparently, the new bargaining chip is placement tests. The students who bargained with admissions at my school last summer were fairly high-achieving students; the statistics suggested they would have placed into the highest level first-year composition and math classes anyway. And, because these high achieving students are so desirable, those with more power than me decided discreetly to waive the placement tests. But, it’s hard for me to imagine that any student we’ve admitted isn’t desirable, hard to imagine that we want any accepted student’s tuition dollars going to another school, especially now that private universities like mine are losing students to less expensive state universities. Now that the precedent has been set, what is to stop any student from bargaining about assessment measures when shopping around? It seems silly that something as basic as a placement test would cause a potential student to go elsewhere, but these students are tired of being tested—they are tested now more than ever, and one more test at the end of a stressful senior year may just be enough to sway the decision in the moment. As writing program administrators charged with maintaining the integrity of writing programs, what do we do when we’re caught between concerns about good pedagogy and pressures from the administration to encourage and retain students? How do we react when faced with students who want to negotiate their positions in the first-year composition curriculum? And, at what point will pedagogical responsibility be pushed too far over the shifting line into the consumer market in which the customer is always right and education becomes a purely capitalist endeavor?

For several reasons, my answer to the particular question about placement tests, at least for first-year composition, has been directed self-placement. Implementing this form of placement wasn’t completely, or even primarily, driven by the consumer issues I’ve raised—but it certainly is a customer-pleasing solution. I believe in the studies connecting student efficacy to success in the writing classroom, and I’m quite persuaded by the studies that show that students place themselves as reliably as we place them—those two factors motivated me to put forth a proposal for directed self-placement. I considered, proposed, and implemented directed self-placement based on a core belief that it is a part of a better writing pedagogy. As I’ll argue below, however, I also believe that directed self-placement could serve as a model case study for how many student-centered pedagogies can be read and manipulated through the lens of consumer analysis.

Directed Self-Placement as Customer Care: A Consumer Model

I have to admit that when I proposed directed self-placement, I considered how much easier my life would be if I could provide better and simpler “customer service.” Besides, who am I to tell a consumer-student I don’t know beyond some numbers on a paper what she needs—good customer service representatives listen to the customer, consider individual needs, and help the customer make an informed decision. Should the business of education be run so differently? So, as part of my proposal to the administration, I did include data about the dissatisfaction previous years’ incoming freshmen expressed about being asked to take a two-hour essay exam. Customer dissatisfaction resounds loudly on my campus—and I don’t think we’re alone in this, especially amongst private universities.

Directed self-placement has a strong pedagogical purpose, to my mind. I agree with scholars like Erica Reynolds who argue that “the research shows a strong correlation between students’ confidence about their abilities to write and their actual writing ability. Studies on self-efficacy show that students with high self-efficacy in relation to writing

are indeed better writers than are their low self-efficacious peers.” (91). Reynolds concludes that DSP works for three reasons, all associated with self-efficacy:

First, the battery of statements for consideration and the descriptions of the two courses [given to students so that they can make placement decisions] are genuinely representative of the abilities and skill that students will need to utilize in order to succeed in each of the courses. Second, most students are more acutely aware of their own reading and writing abilities than can be measured by any of the traditional placement methods. And finally, the majority of students want to do what is best for them. By empowering students to place themselves we are doing them a favor. When we choose a writing course for students based on ACT scores or timed writing tests we are imposing a very important decision in their lives—a decision that may not even be the best for them. (100-01)

I’m convinced by the statistics, like those compiled by Janice Chermekoff at Kutztown University and Cynthia E. Cornell and Robert D. Newton at DePauw, that show that grade distribution (at the moment, the only real indicator we have that students succeed at the same rate whether we place them or they place themselves) remains about the same when directed self-placement is instituted. I included all these pedagogical arguments in my proposal for DSP as well.

But, I also think that directed self-placement gives customers what they want; it allows students to tell us who they are and what they can do, and to decide which “products” are right for them. As Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles argue, “a unique feature of DSP is that it permits the construction of a self within a community because it fosters agency, choice, and self-determination” (57). In other words, it caters to the individual whom the business model and consumer world have taught us to target. But there is inherent tension to directed self-placement:

Students are given individual freedom of choice, while at the same time, they are being guided through deliberation—they are allowed agency, choice, and self-determination, but it only works to their advantage so long as there is association, connection, and dependence with established members of the community. (Royer and Gilles 61)

Royer and Gilles are pointing to the inherent contradiction we have to work through: students want to make their own, individual choices, but those choices need to associate them with peers who are like them in order to be taught by someone familiar with the discourse of the larger community they’ve joined by entering the university. Students must become a part of a group; DSP allows them the freedom to determine which group is right for them.

I would argue that the tension Royer and Gilles describe continues to mimic the consumer world our students are familiar with and thus equips them to understand the consequences of a bad choice in the same way they understand the perils of a bad purchase. We, as experts in the field providing students with the guidance they need to make an informed and intelligent choice about their placement, serve as the educational equivalent to something like *Consumer Reports* or *Epinions.com*. Modern consumers rarely make purchases, at least large ones, without first consulting experts or other consumers who have tried the products. They are adept at taking advice or rejecting it, at buying based on recommendations or ignoring those recommendations in favor of their gut instincts. Directed self-placement is just that—directed. As Reynolds’s description of the DSP process points out, students are provided detailed descriptions of the available courses. At my university, we provide students with a questionnaire that asks them to evaluate their writing abilities based on previous experiences, aptitude as measured by grades and assessments like the SAT, and attitudes toward writing. The results of that questionnaire suggest which first-year course is most appropriate. This allows students to define themselves but provides expert guidance in choosing the appropriate “community” to join. By providing students with expert guidance, but no actual “buying” mandate, directed self-placement provides students with the kind of “shopping” experience for their first-year composition course they are accustomed to in other marketplaces.

Directed self-placement also allows for a more pleasant experience for students. Consumers rarely go back to a store in which they’ve had an unpleasant experience, at least not without incentives. At my university, prior to the implementation of directed self-placement, we had students take an online writing placement test before they ever showed up for orientation, and this caused several problems, not the least of which was that the technology failed quite often and so the first real experience with our university was negative: students had to figure out who to call to reset the exam and then start over. In some cases, students lost entire essays that had taken them the full two hours to write. That these technical glitches happened often because of errors at the students’ ends didn’t matter; what mattered was the frustration and that, since many students took the exam early in the summer (or even in the spring), they still had the option to go elsewhere for their college educations. Using the consumer metaphor, students had the right to “return” our product (even if they lost the minimal deposit, which if we want to push the metaphor, could be considered the equivalent of a restocking fee) and enroll at another university, one where the first experience wasn’t so wrought with anxiety.

Even if students made it past the testing process, there was still the negative experience of being placed in a class to contend with. As Royer and Gilles point out, the moment of having placement dictated, often by being handed a slip of paper, rarely makes students happy (63). At my school, this meant that a student's first experience with her advisor was often an argument or a negotiation; students often wanted to argue their placements, generally winding up in my office appealing with arguments about technical difficulties that affected their writing or apologies for having blown off the test and written an essay that didn't really represent their writing abilities. So, before classes even started, students began a scavenger hunt around a landscape they barely knew and through buildings they'd never seen for some university official who could change their placements, an experience which left them unhappy and filled with doubts about their "purchase."

Even if the placement process didn't sour students on the university in general, it certainly wasn't doing the English department any favors. Our department isn't one of the larger majors on campus, and it's not like I would expect our numbers to soar but for the placement process. However, there is very little hope that students, already bitter about their English courses because they feel they've been misplaced or punished (as many students who wrote sloppy, fast essays and were told by their advisors to suffer the consequences—a lower-level English course—for not trying harder often felt) are going to be converts to our major. Even if students didn't hold their bad experiences against the university, they certainly could hold them against our department; pushing the consumer model, this means students may stay in the store, but they're not buying our brand.

As I've argued above, this generation wants to be seen not as a collective, but as individuals. Each wants her personal experiences lauded and considered. What directed self-placement allows for is that consideration and praise. Alternative methods of writing assessment for placement inherently generalize; using SAT or ACT scores to place students asserts that a score range tells us the same story every time, when in fact we know there are multiple storylines masked beneath those numbers. Writing placement exams, as well, tend to erase the individual, as readers of those exams apply universal rubrics to the writing, often in a serious time crunch that prevents them from considering the nuanced merits of an individual essay. And, these placement methods often seek to highlight the negative; often when we explain placements to students, we phrase our explanations in terms of lacking, pointing out what their essays or test scores indicate they don't know in order to justify placing them in a course intended to fill in those deficiencies. Writing placement, by its very nature, is a system that erases individuality and condemns students for what they lack rather than acknowledging the tools they have.

Directed self-placement comes at this same issue from a different stance. Surveys used to help make placement decisions ask students to take inventory of their personal experiences with writing and reading. These surveys don't simply take into account test scores and grades; they ask students to think about and evaluate the whole of their literacy practices. I don't mean to suggest that directed self-placement wholly gets rid of generalizations; but, in as much as any placement process can take the individual, her experiences, and her personal assessment of her abilities into account, directed self-placement seems to, especially as it tries to take measure of the whole student picture, not just the numbers. And, in constructing that picture, directed self-placement asks students to consider what they have, what they are bringing to the composition classroom, and what their personal tools will allow them to accomplish in the composition classroom. Returning to the idea of student as customer, the customer is always happier when seen as an individual with merit instead of as a generalized depiction of what is lacking.

Implications to Consider: Have We Centered on the Student too Much?

Directed self-placement is a good answer for improving customer satisfaction, and, to my mind, good pedagogical practice, though I do question how much negotiating power students will continue to build. This is what makes directed self-placement a good case study; it's a strong example of a good, student-centered pedagogy that, in the right (or perhaps wrong) context can be twisted to give students a new kind of power in the classroom, one which could allow them to see instructors as something akin to street merchants to be haggled with. It is this twist that gives me pause and makes me wonder if the strong pedagogy is being subsumed in the consumer message. In "The Business Culture of Community College," an article that applies as much to four-year institutions as it does to two-year, John S. Levin argues that administrators and colleges are necessarily seeing the student as the client. Because of this, the consumer-students "and their demands increasingly shape the curricular and organizational strategies [. . . used] to garner revenues" (13). While many scholars have argued that the role of professionals in higher education is to "mediate student demands and endeavor to shape responsible curricula that maximize educational attainment" (13), the reality is that curricula are adapting to consumer demands at the expense of things like liberal arts programs (14). It is my fear that if we don't reframe our pedagogical practices in a discourse of

education, students will see our choices as ones that merely respond to those client demands and that the demands will become louder and stronger.

In the spring of 2008, I presented 225 incoming freshmen and their parents with an explanation of the directed self-placement process. While parents are not supposed to be involved directly in the DSP process, my school wants parents to feel invested in the purchase they are making for their children, so parents were invited to attend the informational meeting that went over things such as how to choose classes and placement procedures. In this meeting, I encountered the next line of fire in student consumerism: students, and their parents, who want to argue their way out of our liberal arts core curriculum. One mother told me her child, who had not taken and would not be taking AP exams in English and had no dual-enrollment transfer credit—in other words, nothing that stood as proof of academic achievement for the purposes of course credit—was too good to take first-year composition of any kind. In front of hundreds of people across a packed auditorium, this mother wanted to tell me that her daughter should be exempted from courses she felt she didn't need. This mother's argument: Why should she pay for courses her daughter doesn't need or want? Who was I to dictate what courses she should "buy"? Parents haven't begun questioning classes within majors yet (I suspect it's because they want their children in accredited programs, so they can't argue about classes mandated by the accrediting bodies), but our core liberal arts curriculum is individual to our school; students and their parents, however, seem to be demanding that curriculum become the next frontier tailored to the individual student, and, as Levin argues, we're starting to accommodate those consumer demands as well. It is my fear that if we don't reframe how we talk about student-centered pedagogies, we will perpetuate a discourse that will further allow consumer-students to dictate what the university will become.

Much like consumerism, a business culture is spreading throughout higher education, and that model creates initiatives such as "workforce restructuring [like fewer tenure-track positions and more adjuncts], curricular adaptation, [and] entrepreneurial revenue generation [as demonstrated by the increasing numbers of grant writing specialists on campuses]" (Levin 15). The business model draws on the commercial sector, borrowing from its advertising and marketing practices, and is informed by "business fads prized more for their legitimacy than their utility" (15). The rhetorics of business and consumerism are shaping not only how students see us but the way we see students, and I have to admit, there is a part of me that is truly persuaded to see students as customers, at least when it comes to marketing, course offerings and choices, and even attendance. There are moments when I can be persuaded to see attendance as a choice, not a mandate. If a student buys a chair in a class, who am I to tell that student she must sit in it a certain number of times a semester or suffer consequences such as being involuntarily withdrawn from the course, docked a letter grade, or even failed? I wouldn't tell a customer who just bought an iPod that he must use it a minimum of three times a week or return it. But, I do worry how far this rhetoric will carry us in the wrong direction. I worry that Composition and Rhetoric's focus on student-centered pedagogies has opened this door in some unique ways.

The Problem with being Student-Centered

Student-consumerism and student-centered pedagogies both privilege student knowledge. Directed self-placement, for example, is a heavily student-centered assessment method. This placement method insists not only that students have valuable knowledge to add to the community—a foundational belief at the heart of student-centered pedagogies—but that they have the knowledge to pick their own community. Student-centered pedagogies revolutionized the way we teach composition, but have they also helped to create a beast that is further fed by student-consumerism? Perhaps it is the inevitable intersection of these two that is threatening to the future of classroom and assessment practices.

We already have assessment models that allow students to negotiate or contract for their own grades—it's another example of a student-centered model that could just as easily be argued for in the consumer context of bargaining for the best price. While collaborative grading can be intended to help teach students how to be better peer reviewers by, as Susan Kirby has argued, helping "students [to] look at their own writing with a teacher's eye—that more critical, objective, experienced eye" (qtd. in Speck and Jones 27), the extension of it has been to allow students to contract for their grades early in the semester or to collaboratively grade their final portfolios with instructors at the end of the semester. When students help to determine their own grades in a composition course, one could argue that what they are doing is negotiating how much work they are willing to do or how much improvement they are willing to make for the grade they want; each student is allowed, in effect, to haggle for her own grade, to try to get the best "price" (perhaps doing less revision for the already proficient student or being rewarded for doing more work on less successful writing for the less proficient writer) for the grade she wants. We've couched our teaching methods in rhetoric that makes student-centered pedagogies feel like progressive, valid, and effective models, but have we moved so far towards privileging the student and what she brings to the classroom that we have turned

ourselves into store clerks rather than purveyors of knowledge? There is a pedagogical foundation to a student-centered pedagogy like grade-contracting, but if we only highlight the student-centered, we lose that pedagogical message. Students, immersed in a consumer world and fluent in the rhetoric of it, no longer see such practices as grade contracting as tools for helping them look at their work through fresh eyes or with a new perspective. I don't mean to argue that student-centered pedagogies have no place in the classroom; I incorporate them into my own. But, I do want to argue that we need to change the presentation of them.

Part of the problem we face is that administrations and admissions departments aren't going to change their rhetoric; treating students like valued customers gets those students onto campus and enrolled. But what we can do is work to create a clear line between student life and the classroom, a line that is drawn with the rhetoric we use to present our pedagogies. We need to present our methods as just that—pedagogies. And pedagogies with strong rationales behind them. I still believe that directed self-placement is the best placement method available to us; I would like the fact that it's also consumer-friendly to be absent from the conversation with students. We need to make sure that we're not conflating consumer-friendly with student-friendly. The danger is that they've become one and the same and they've become that way partially because admissions and administrations are on the frontline of the university experience. Students are treated as customers first—and it's easy to understand why. But, we can change the rhetoric, reframe it once they step foot in the classroom, so that the pedagogical benefits—the learning outcomes—of student-centered pedagogies such as directed self-placement are at the forefront of our conversations. We need to stress the directed part more and feel free to assert our role as the expert. We may know that our methods are student-centered, but what we need to be focused on is not how our pedagogies and assessments cater to the consumer, but how they develop the student.

Notes

1. See Laudicina and Tramutola, as well as Stark for further discussion and elaboration on court cases that argue legal suits based on consumer rights. ([Return to text.](#))
2. See Stark for a detailed discussion of the developments. ([Return to text.](#))

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