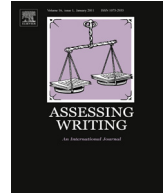




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Assessing Writing



Directed self-placement questionnaire design: Practices, problems, possibilities



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ABSTRACT

Over the last fifteen years, directed self-placement (DSP) has become a widespread approach to writing placement in US post-secondary settings. However, to date, the theoretical underpinnings of DSP instruments have received little scholarly attention. Drawing on survey design principles, this study analyzes a corpus of thirty DSP questionnaires to identify the range of theoretical concepts underlying DSP questions, as well as the dimensions used to measure those concepts. Arguing that the validity of DSP in local contexts depends to a great extent on the initial theoretical and empirical basis of the instruments used to structure DSP processes, the researchers discuss the problems as well as the possibilities of the concepts and dimensions currently used in DSP questionnaires. Finally, they offer the example of one of their own universities' DSP questionnaires, which is grounded in rhetorical genre theory, as a case study for how attending to questionnaire concepts and dimensions can contribute to the thoughtful design of locally situated DSP instruments.

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1. Introduction

Although we didn't know one another in early 2009, each of us was grappling with a similar assessment-related challenge: we were both helping to revise directed self-placement (DSP) instruments at our respective institutions, and neither of us could find the kind of well-theorized,

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empirically-grounded guidelines we wanted for developing our new DSP questions. We were working in very different institutional contexts—Laura as a graduate research assistant at the University of Michigan’s Sweetland Center for Writing, Christie as a staff researcher at Portland State University—but we both found ourselves developing our questionnaires in the same way we suspect most programs do. We read the (still relatively small) body of composition literature on DSP and found that it tends to focus on the principle of self-placement as it plays out in various institutional settings, rather than on the theoretical underpinnings of the DSP questionnaires themselves. We both had to settle for examining the most readily-available instruments from other institutions, then “wing” our questionnaire design based on what we believed were the most salient factors influencing students’ success as college writers at our own universities.

Since then, we have both gone on to work on DSP projects at other institutions. Laura is now a writing program administrator (WPA) at Wake Forest University, where she has launched a task-based DSP procedure along the lines of the “University of Michigan Model.” Christie followed in Laura’s footsteps as a research assistant at the Sweetland Center for Writing, where she has helped assess and revise the University of Michigan’s DSP process; she also continues to work with Portland State University to improve their DSP instrument and has helped set up new DSP initiatives at three community colleges. We often discuss these projects with one another, and we have continued to lament the lack of research on the theoretical concepts underlying DSP questions, the most effective metrics to get at those concepts, and the kinds of questions that most accurately predict students’ success in first-year writing and beyond. Despite our growing experience with DSP implementation, we have often felt that we were, on some level, still winging the questionnaire design. Finally, we decided it was up to us to conduct the research we wished to see. This article is part of a program of research devoted to improving the theoretical basis for DSP questionnaire development. We say *basis* because what we present here is not a validation study of particular DSP questions, but rather an analysis of existing DSP questionnaires used across North America and a set of conceptual tools for developing DSP questions in light of local aims and needs.

One way to understand this project is through Kane’s (2013) validation model, which requires building an interpretation and use argument (IUA) for test scores that is distinct from but related to the assessment’s validity argument, and which informs assessment design. Ultimately, the validation of any questionnaire-based DSP procedure hinges on alignment between the construct of writing evoked in the DSP questionnaire—which yields the “score” and resulting placement recommendation—and the local construct of writing. Thus, a writing program must achieve conceptual alignment between its DSP instrument and the local construct as a necessary starting point for the longer-term process of validating any DSP procedure. We offer preliminary theoretical considerations for designing questionnaires that meet these criteria.

In this article, we map the theoretical terrain of thirty existing DSP questionnaires, guided by several questions informed by principles of survey question design. What theoretical *concepts* do current DSP instruments attempt to measure, and what *dimensions* of those concepts do they use as metrics? What are the benefits and potential drawbacks of the concepts and dimensions in existing DSP instruments? What “alternative argument” (Kane, 2013, p. 15) might those concepts and dimensions offer a program seeking better alignment between its local expectations and its DSP design? What theoretical assumptions about language and learning are rendered more visible when we frame DSP questionnaire design in this way? And, finally, how can we use this visibility to create more theoretically-consistent questions that help inform students’ self-placement decisions in particular contexts? We begin by reviewing the literature on DSP instrumentation. We then present our methods and key findings from analysis of our corpus of DSP questionnaires. Finally, we offer the case study of how Laura developed the Wake Forest University DSP instrument, which is grounded in rhetorical genre theory, as an example of how more conscious attention to question concepts and dimensions can inform the design of DSP instruments that align with local constructs and objectives.

One final introductory note to readers: At some points in this article, we take a narrative approach that, while familiar to those in composition studies, may strike other readers of *Assessing Writing* as

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