

UC Davis

Journal of Writing Assessment

Title

Localizing Directed Self-Placement: UX Stories and Methods

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9sm4851w>

Journal

Journal of Writing Assessment, 17(1)

ISSN

1543-043X

Authors

Kryger, Kathleen
Mitchum, Catrina
Higgins, Aly

Publication Date

2024-03-27

DOI

10.5070/W4jwa.1582

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Localizing Directed Self-Placement: UX Stories and Methods

Kathleen Kryger, University of Arizona, kryger@arizona.edu

Catrina Mitchum, University of Maryland Global Campus, catrina.mitchum@faculty.umgc.edu

Aly Higgins, University of Arizona, alyssahiggins@arizona.edu

Abstract: This article seeks to support localization efforts in placement assessment. We argue that as a technical communication endeavor, directed self-placement (DSP) can benefit from equity-focused scholarship in technical and professional communication (TPC). We thus frame DSP as a form of advocacy, and we provide a range of examples from our institution to demonstrate how user experience (UX) design methodologies are imperative to DSP localization. Implementing UX methods can better help WPAs address equity concerns by foregrounding accessibility, usability, and student empowerment from the beginning.

Keywords: directed self-placement, localization, user experience design, accessibility, technical and professional communication

To best sustain equitable practices for increasingly diverse student populations, writing program administrators (WPAs) must iteratively examine their placement processes. With student self-placement in particular, user-centered design principles can support a model that accomplishes both administrative and justice-oriented goals. For directed self-placement (DSP), the placement method we focus on in this article, students' experiences must be considered not just in aggregate but also at the individual level. By positioning DSP within the realm of technical and professional communication (TPC) scholarship, and by framing DSP as a form of social justice advocacy, we demonstrate how WPAs can foreground localized accessibility and student-driven usability in their placement processes from the beginning. We argue that localization for DSP can be bolstered by user experience (UX) design methodologies to create more robust, precise, and equitable placement processes.

Scholarship in the fourth wave of writing assessment (Behm & Miller, 2012) has prioritized concerns of fairness, and this social justice orientation has, of course, extended to placement. DSP has potential as an antiracist assessment practice by facilitating more equitable distributions of racial formations in course enrollments (Inoue, 2009b; Klausman & Lynch, 2022), meaning that all students have open access to the courses available to them and can self-assess and self-select. Students are not only the locus of placement work; they are also the population most impacted by its designs and outcomes. The stakes are increasingly high: research shows that students' first-year courses are an important factor in student success and persistence (Poe et al., 2019); developmental education scholarship demonstrates that students placed in developmental courses are more likely to never finish their initial coursework or persist to degree (Adams et al., 2009; Valentine et al., 2017), especially in community college contexts (VanOra, 2019). There are several unique challenges for transfer students when it comes to placement, credit articulation, and retention (Grites, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016), and students from historically marginalized backgrounds face additional structural inequities (Brock & Slater, 2021). Applying UX methodologies like usability testing to assessment design doesn't necessarily mitigate such external factors, but it does invite students to be part of the design of tools and technologies that significantly impact their experiences in writing programs.

Localization is a fundamental concept of both writing assessment and TPC. In writing assessment scholarship, localization is a process of attunement, a means of ensuring assessments are aptly situated within the context of the class, program, unit, or institution in which the assessment operates. In TPC, localization has a slightly different purpose. According to the Society for Technical Communication (2016), localization is the process of "creating or customizing a product or service for a specific regional or local market," suggesting that the industry standard regards localization not only as contextualization but also as a means of ensuring usability within (and across) cultural contexts. More recent social justice orientations to TPC localization argue for including the populations most directly impacted (Acharya, 2019; Agboka, 2013). In particular, Agboka's (2013, 2014) framework of participatory localization advocates for (a) a dynamic understanding of localization, one that moves beyond linguacultural aspects, and (b) the co-development of products *alongside* users, rather than relying on generalized and decontextualized assumptions of users' needs. For placement assessment, UX can be a practical first step toward these participatory localization goals.

Though there are several contextualized examples of DSP implementation (see Nastal et al., 2022), there is still little published scholarship addressing how to localize for DSP beyond choosing

a hosting site, tool design, and crafting questionnaires that address the writing program's learning outcomes. By describing the use of UX methodologies for iterating on an existing DSP, this article begins addressing this need. This TPC approach to DSP can also contribute to a form of communal justicing (Gere et al., 2021), a framework that aims to disrupt inequities at the disciplinary level by prioritizing structural interventions that include everyone, not just administrators. Bridging some of the distance between the equity-focused scholarship in both writing studies and TPC is another goal of this work.

To begin this bridging, we provide some of the theoretical relations between DSP and TPC as well as those between writing assessment and TPC models of localization. We follow this synthesis with examples of DSP iteration from our institution, providing a sample range of UX methods that are (a) flexible across contexts, (b) relatively manageable to implement, and (c) cognizant of both WPA and student time, labor, and compensation concerns. As with writing assessment writ large, there are no panacea UX methodologies, but there are options that afford DSP developers the flexibility needed for participatory localization.¹ Placement assessment is messy, and UX is messy, but the work is absolutely necessary.

Validation for Equity

Since the inception of college entrance exams and composition courses, placement has been a concern of educational measurement and eventually composition studies and writing assessment (Crowley, 1998; Yancey, 1999), with placement trends ranging from holistic essay scoring (White, 1985) to portfolio placement (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986) and now to student self-placement (Royer & Gilles, 1998). DSP scholarship has a strong history of attending to student agency and power relations (Balay & Nelson, 2012; Kenner, 2016; Moos & Van Zanen, 2019), suggesting that DSP bolsters student self-efficacy, institutional knowledge and awareness, and student *and* teacher satisfaction with courses; validity and reliability (Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Toth & Aull, 2014), providing evidence that well-designed DSP systems are effective placement tools; and DSP design and practicalities (Aull, 2021; Jones, 2008; Royer & Gilles, 2003, 2012), which further support localization efforts. Additionally, research on DSP for multilingual students has focused on student agency and the complexities of multilingual student placement (Crusan, 2006, 2011; DasBender, 2011; Ferris et al., 2017; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Saenkhum, 2016). On the whole, these studies demonstrate DSP's flexibility, scalability, and effectiveness across diverse student populations.

In recent years, research has revealed that standardized college entrance/placement exams, such as ACT and SAT, have predictive validity issues—they primarily measure wealth and race, rather than *college readiness* (Aguinis et al., 2016; Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Mattern et al., 2016). Thankfully, DSP has been shown to interrupt structural racism in placement systems by shifting demographic distributions of students in first-year composition (FYC) courses to be more representative of the overall student population (Inoue, 2009a; Klausman & Lynch, 2022). At our

¹ We use the word *developers* to refer to those who work on DSP systems: teaching and non-teaching staff, tenure and non-tenure-track faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and many others. We use this word to highlight the intense technical design role of those who contribute to the development and ongoing maintenance of DSP systems. We use “WPAs” when we wish to draw attention to disciplinary insights and/or more traditional WPA skills/labor. We make this distinction because if we are positioning students as users of DSP, it coheres to position WPAs as developers of those systems. We also find *developers* to be a more elegant and less hierarchical way to refer to the broad range of staff, students, and faculty who administer placement.

university, too, historically underserved populations are now enrolling in all our FYC courses, not just our studio course, at rates that more closely match their university student percentage. Klausman and Lynch (2022) found similar evidence in their context, reporting decreased enrollment in developmental courses. In explaining their switch from ACCUPLACER to informed self-placement (ISP), Klausman and Lynch state, “our ISP process has had a great benefit for incoming students of all races and ethnicities, as well as students with disabilities, low-income students, and other demographics . . . success rates have actually risen to 80 percent and continue to rise as faculty have embraced equity-minded pedagogical practices” (p. 78). DSP can also address the aims of social justice by considering intersectionality; for example, by disaggregating their data not just by race but also by other demographic factors, such as disability and Pell Grant recipients, Klausman and Lynch (2022) demonstrate how DSP can potentially disrupt not just systemic racism but also ableism and classism.

Toth (2018) usefully summarizes these and other efforts as “validation for social justice” (p. 145), suggesting that DSP could be well-suited for strengthening placement equity as long as there are validation efforts at the local level. There has been increasing interest in DSP for two-year colleges (Gilman et al., 2019; Klausman et al., 2016; Toth, 2018, 2019), which tend to serve more diverse student populations than their four-year university counterparts and are vital pathways to higher education. When analyzing DSP’s potential to serve community college populations, Toth (2018) writes, “DSP’s ability to achieve that promise [of social justice] is contingent on processes designed with a critical awareness of ideologies that reproduce social inequalities . . . this labor must be undertaken carefully, critically, and continuously” (p. 151). For many reasons, but especially because placement has serious implications for student success, DSP must be understood as a social justice endeavor.

An Advocacy Model of DSP

In addition to being a site of social justice, DSP is also a highly intercultural and technical communicative system. DSP can be validated not just by construct validity (i.e., composition studies content) or consequential validity frameworks (i.e., grades, course distribution, DFW [drop, fail, withdrawal] rates, and retention) but also by the social justice and design standards of TPC methodologies. In concert with Agboka’s (2013, 2014) participatory localization framework and Jones’ (2016) understanding of technical communication as full of advocacy potential, we position DSP as a form of advocacy, thus answering Poe et al.’s (2018) call to realize how “writing assessment best serves students when justice is taken as the ultimate aim of assessment” (p. 5). By prioritizing student empowerment, DSP systems can better accomplish their goal of offering an equitable means of placement.

It should be said that placement is an incredibly complex site of academic institutional policy, articulation agreements, state mandates, and national education standards (particularly with common college examinations). Local placement systems must consider an intricately tangled web of policy, curricula, and course credit articulation across international, national, state, local, institutional, and programmatic levels. DSP doesn’t always interrupt these complex systems but it does encourage developers to make consequences obvious and unambiguous. The responsibility of developers in this dialogic system is to provide students with sufficient information to make an informed choice. As Toth (2019) so helpfully puts it, “the twin fundamentals of DSP are thus *guidance* and *choice*.” Because of the weight placed on the guidance portion of the DSP equation,

developers take great pains to ensure comprehensive information and instructions. The relevant program- and course-level outcomes (and their contexts, purposes, and values) are not always easy to explain, particularly to those outside of writing studies, and most of the transfer/articulation policies impacting their choices aren't simple either, especially for international or transfer students.

It is this vital need to explain expert information to non-experts where we begin positioning DSP as technical communication. According to the Society for Technical Communication (n.d., 2016), the characteristics of technical communication are as follows:

1. Communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations;
2. Communicating by using technology, such as web pages or social media sites; and
3. Providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication.

Like most contemporary instructional materials, DSP corresponds well to these definitions. First, one of the key components of DSP is *guidance*. In a comprehensive DSP system, developers must communicate some, if not all, of the following items:

- FYC curriculum (i.e., the courses available, their differences, and their sometimes-unintuitive sequences);
- Any additional curriculum options (i.e., transfer student courses, advanced composition, writing emphasis courses in the major);
- How these course/sequences satisfy (or don't—this information in particular should be transparent) academic program and graduation requirements;
- Individual course goals/outcomes (and thus program outcomes);
- The ways in which students' unique histories and contexts can impact the available choices, if at all (i.e., being able to “skip” the first course in a sequence through examination scores, dual enrollment, or other transfer credits, in accordance with institutional policy and state articulation agreements);
- Which student behaviors, skills, learning preferences, and academic/interpersonal needs are best suited for the available choices (and why);
- How to complete the placement process, including potentially completing a digital questionnaire and/or writing task, submitting relevant documentation to appropriate parties in particular document formats, selecting a course, and/or communicating with relevant advisory bodies; and
- If appropriate for the local context, examples of course activities, assignments, assessments, sample student writing, and/or syllabi.

Weaving these various nodes of information into a usable DSP system takes considerable time and effort. It also requires technical writing: a comprehensive-enough understanding of local placement procedures to communicate the most relevant information succinctly and thoroughly, and especially in plain, widely accessible language rather than disciplinary jargon. Presuming universal student (and parent or guardian) familiarity with the language of the institution, which is part of what Inoue (2019) refers to as White language supremacy, enacts some of the harmful systemic racism illuminated by scholars like April Baker-Bell (2013) and many others (see Ketai, 2012; Kynard, 2013; Lyiscott, 2018). In this vein, DSP developers must make their specialized knowledge not just cogent and well-organized, but also accessible. For DSP to achieve its goal of

equity and empowerment, students must be able to apply this information to decide which course best meets their goals and needs.

Second, writing itself is a technology (Brooke & Grabill, 2016), and so are assessments (Huot, 2002; Scott & Inoue, 2016). DSP systems are also now primarily mediated through multiple digital technologies/modalities. While many students will be familiar with online questionnaires, developers cannot assume students' levels of technological access, skills, or ability. In design and iteration phases of any student-facing system, especially one as vital as placement, student insights about accessibility and usability are crucial.

Finally, providing usable instructions for completing the DSP and for selecting a course is the crux of any student self-placement system. While developers must determine which details to include, they must also provide just-in-time instructions for questionnaire completion, course selection, and other processes (including clicking the all-important "submit" button). Equally important is the way in which the *choice*, the second fundamental of DSP, is articulated. Most schools have a placement culture of examination and ranking. On our campus, for example, the writing program is (currently) the only unit that implements a student self-placement system; other units use proficiency exams or other metrics to place students. Students often encounter DSP as an outlier, and even when instructions seem clear, uptake is not guaranteed. In addition to instructions for navigating the actual placement tool, this ideological shift from exams to self-placement must also be communicated to students in accessible ways.

We suggest that, like all assessment tools, DSP can be—but isn't automatically—a form of advocacy. As teachers and as administrators, we hold a powerful positionality: in some ways, we exist between students and the institution, and we can mediate aspects of their interactions. Historically in composition studies, teachers have done their best to mitigate power imbalances, but there remains a hierarchy wherein undergraduate students are positioned as those least informed and least qualified to intervene in their own education. For educators and administrators, navigating this intangible space between students and the institution can often feel like an act of translation (translating institutional discourse and practices) and/or guiding (illuminating alternate pathways, signs of trouble, and how and when to access help). Assessment and placement also exist in this space, as they communicate between the student and the institution, often in shorthand. This is a space in which advocacy is much needed.

We position DSP as advocacy because it seeks to make placement an accessible, comprehensive, empowering, and unambiguous process and because it seeks to actively intervene in structural academic marginalization and oppression. For students, DSP can reframe placement as a process in which their input is valued and in fact prioritized, which is ultimately an act of resistance against that hierarchical structure upheld by the institution. Truly trusting students can be transformative, but providing guidance on what that means is also necessary. DSP aims to do this already, which is why UX is vital to its design, implementation, and iteration; it asks developers to focus on the humanness of the process and product.

Aligning Localization Theories for DSP

Broadly articulated, localization is a type of contextualization, a means of attuning to the local and communal. Localization is also both reflective and reflexive, and it provides an orientation to writing assessment that diverges from those found in other disciplines, asking developers to resist demands for efficiency and standardization and instead focus on the specific context of the

evaluation situation they seek to develop. Drawing on the work of Moss (1994a, 1994b, 1998) and others, Huot (2002) articulates a cohesive set of principles for localization for writing studies, stating that assessments ought to be site based, locally controlled, context sensitive, rhetorically based, and accessible (p. 105). Writing placement especially has been noted as a site requiring intensive localization (Adler-Kassner & O’Neill, 2010) because of the intricate conflux of stakeholders, policies, and goals outlined above. Such details change drastically by site; an assessment serving one program or unit will not necessarily do well serving another. For this reason, the development of a placement tool/system of any shape must include localization of some form.

In TPC, localization primarily aims at contextualizing for the purpose of improving the developers’ understandings of the target user group and thus the tool/technology in its context(s). Shivers-McNair and San Diego (2017) find four dimensions of cross-cultural localization: localizing community, localizing goals, localizing communication, and localizing inclusion. These dimensions provide more precise ways to prioritize and implement DSP as localized advocacy; rather than operating under pre-set, outdated, or rigid assumptions of student needs, one can create dialogues toward defining and achieving shared goals. Shivers-McNair and San Diego (2017) further suggest that definitions of words such as *user*, *community*, and *diversity* must be situated locally and responsive to ever-shifting contexts. For example, Hamraie (2017) challenges modern conceptualizations of product design and the term “users,” demonstrating through their research how these concepts and their implications are derived from legacies of industrialism, capitalism, and eugenics. For WPAs, this practice of localizing (or challenging) such definitions could translate to recursively examining how *students* and *student writing* are defined at their institution and in their program.

Additionally, Sun (2012) provides a useful distinction between developer localization and user localization, with the latter differentiated by users’ experience “incorporating the technology into one’s life” (p. 40). This distinction is particularly useful in the DSP context. *Developer localization* includes the traditional assessment localization of program outcomes and their related constructs (WPA concerns), whereas *user localization* focuses on the user perspective and experience: usability, accessibility, user interface, offered pathways, and so on (student concerns). Saenkhum (2016) reminds us of how many complex interlocking factors (many of them external) play a role in student self-placement, and though WPAs can never predict all the possible factors, UX can help prevent or mitigate inaccessible designs.

Below, we describe three examples—three stories—of our local institution, demonstrating the various ways (large and small) that UX can help localize placement assessment as well as promote more theoretically sound, accessible, and equitable DSP design.

Stories of Localizing Through UX

The full implementation of a DSP system for the writing program at our large land-grant university in the southwestern United States has been ongoing for many years, but the initial design for a DSP tool began in 2014. By 2016, when College Board made changes to its SAT scoring procedures, our WPAs were ready to shift from an algorithm-based placement to a self-placement system. This kairotic moment offered many institutions across the country, including ours, an opportunity to explore other placement systems, but the shift didn’t occur overnight: developing any digital DSP system is always complicated, and even more so for incoming cohorts of more than 10,000 students. By the launch in 2018, our DSP system was called the Foundations

Writing Evaluation (FWE), which later resulted in two distinct off-shoots: the international FWE (iFWE) and online FWE (oFWE). These tools are hosted by Qualtrics and are monitored perennially by a dedicated administrative staff member and a rotating group of graduate assistant administrators and placement advisors (depending on funding). These various FWE systems are intricate and sometimes difficult to maintain, especially during peak orientation and enrollment seasons. For us, UX was a much-needed intervention because of the demands on our one full-time placement WPA to develop (and maintain) multiple FWEs across different campuses and student populations. This internal exigence was exciting in that it demonstrated institutional buy-in and desirable implications for more efficient enrollment management, but the demand also meant increased labor and, along with it, increased chances of weaker localization across the FWE variations.

Our FWE system currently has several features, among them (a) a Qualtrics online survey tool, (b) year-round email advising, (c) synchronous orientation session advising, and (d) a “Handy Guide to Foundations Writing” webpage. Currently, there are different Qualtrics tools for student populations: main campus international students, main campus students, international online campus, and online campus students. The Qualtrics tool is the central feature of the DSP process, and it relies on an internal web service that reads secure student information (such as transcripts) and, while the student takes the FWE, filters relevant information regarding their course/sequence options. The Qualtrics tool also hosts a 19-item self-assessment questionnaire that inquires about students’ literacy backgrounds and learning preferences. Through this survey, students can report pending dual enrollment/transfer credits (and relevant exam scores), select a course, and request additional support from placement advisors. Most of the FWEs include a course recommendation, a writing task (or two), and a link to the Handy Guide, which offers course descriptions, sample assignment guides, and sample class activities.

In the following sections, we present three methodologies for DSP: usability studies, UX design research, and embedded reflective opportunities. Each section describes potential methods of utilizing student input and seeking collaboration on the design, implementation, and iteration of a DSP. These methodologies demonstrate both small-scale and large-scale ways of enacting participatory localization.

Usability Studies

As Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo (2009) so succinctly put it, “usability is about users” (p. 1). Usability testing, or usability studies, is intended to support the design process of any given technology. Perhaps as it implies, usability is generally understood to be about ease of use and usefulness, centering the needs and experiences of the users rather than a system’s aesthetic or design. Some usability principles include learnability, readability, memorability, efficiency, error recovery, and satisfaction (Acharya, 2019).

Our team conducted a usability study in Fall 2019 on the main campus FWE. For this usability study, the team asked a group of university students to take the FWE and use Zoom to record their screen during the process. The students also participated in a follow-up group discussion and were given a brief explanation of the process prior to testing. The results of the testing revealed issues around user interface, content, sequences, and visuals. The developers wanted to know more about how students reacted to the questionnaire items and the sequencing of DSP items such as the self-assessment questionnaire, writing task, and follow-up questions.

There were also a broad range of affective responses to the FWE, particularly regarding the course recommendation, which is calculated based on the responses to the 19-item self-assessment questionnaire. We learned that students were not accessing the supplemental materials. The results of the usability testing also revealed that students didn't recognize that they had the power to choose a course for themselves. This data was used to think more carefully about the organization of information not just embedded within the FWE itself but also across other platforms where students gather information: namely the digital orientation platform used to deliver orientation content and matriculation requirements to new students prior to their first semester, as well as the writing program and FWE home webpages. For more details about the study and its goals, methods, results, and modifications, see the [UX Portfolio](#) of Aly Higgins (n.d.), one of the primary developers at the time.

This particular instance of implementing usability testing toward the improvement of an already existing DSP system was successful in that our team gathered useful data for iterating on the FWE, but the process was not without challenges or data limitations. For example, the users who participated in the usability study were user-adjacent to our target population, rather than users from our target population. They were not incoming students matriculating into the university; they were students who had already taken at least one semester of courses, and they were largely late-career students. This positionality was further complicated because the majority of the students (but not all) were English majors with confidence in their writing behaviors/skills. Ultimately, there should have been a broader representation of students from different disciplines and backgrounds. Despite these limitations, the results of the usability testing did contribute to revisions to the FWE before it went live in spring 2020 for the next wave of incoming students. In particular, we were able to revise the sequencing of sections and add some visuals/gifs. The process of gathering student feedback on the usability of the FWE created opportunities to discuss both specific details of our DSP tool as well as broader concerns, such as the complications of transfer students completing the same self-assessment questionnaire items as the incoming first-year students.

UX Design Research

As we have noted, placement assessment is incredibly messy. Thankfully, UX design helps reduce some of the messiness, at least on the students' side: the easier the process, the more likely students are to matriculate, enroll, and persist through their programs. For WPAs, UX offers solutions to questions of equity, accessibility, user-friendliness, uptake, and localization. UX methods can be shaped to address any of these concerns. In general, UX prioritizes users' lived experience and honors their knowledge. The Creative Reaction Lab (n.d.) offers its approach, Equity-Centered Community Design, which prioritizes empathy, collaborative creation, engagement with the communities in which/with whom they work, and a critical approach to power, arguing that power must be "acknowledged, dismantled, and/or shared." Likewise, the Design Justice Network (2018) advocates for similar principles that align well with coalitional approaches. In these models, the communities of users determine the methods used, rather than having methods forced upon them by developers. Some UX methods include diary studies, journey mapping, prototype testing, empathy mapping, and task analyses; for more examples and descriptions of UX research, see [The UX Cookbook](#) by Bob Liu and colleagues (2020). The feasibility and adaptability of these methods across contexts is one of their strengths, and part of the localization process for DSP would be to

determine (iteratively and collaboratively with students) which UX frameworks and methods best align with a community's needs.

Over the course of 2021 and 2022, our team requested IRB approval (Protocol #2106926122) and received funding to implement a UX/participatory design research study. In particular, we were looking to revise our co-curricular courses, which would help us iterate on course designs and curricula as well as the questionnaire design of the oFWE (the DSP serving specifically our online campus, which is separate from our main campus and serves only online students). In summer 2021, we conducted focus groups with students who had completed ENGL197B, the co-curricular course connected to our online campus ENGL101 and ENGL102 courses. A published description of the results of the focus groups, as well as the subsequent coding and analysis, is forthcoming (Kryger & Mitchum, in press). To summarize, having conversations with students about their experiences provided surprising insights into how to revise the oFWE. We didn't anticipate a majority presence of transfer students in our focus groups, but we learned so much about their unique challenges for transfer and placement. Often, there are far fewer support structures for transfer students, especially adult returning students and distance/online students. Their concerns and issues allowed us to further localize our DSP system and the corresponding curriculum with more precision and awareness. These focus groups were followed up with usability testing of the new DSP questionnaire items, and will also, in the future, include a validity survey asking students about their experience with the placement process. Overall, UX is primed to help WPAs better serve students in accessible, contextual, and equitable ways by providing methodological frameworks and toolkits for student-centered and user-developed placement systems.

Embedded Opportunities for Reflection

One unique facet of our FWE is that the developers built into the initial design of the Qualtrics survey a few mechanisms for collecting student feedback. We have thus been collecting data about student experiences with our DSP system since 2018. There are two primary sources of this phenomenological data: optional, end-of-survey questionnaire items, and, later, student responses to a reflective writing activity. Both have been useful to our developers and useful for gauging students' overall impressions of the process. The two optional post-questionnaire items provide both quantitative and qualitative data:

- **ITEM 1:** "How useful did you find each of the following sections in helping you choose your writing course?" (5-point Likert scale per item listed)
 - "Prior reading and writing experience"
 - "Writing task"
 - "Compare your writing with student samples"
 - "Course recommendation"
 - "Course descriptions"
- **ITEM 2:** "What did you like and/or dislike about the Directed Self-Placement?" (open-ended question)

These questions are sequenced at the end of the FWE after the self-assessment, the writing task, and the course selection. The questions have no bearing on students' course selection and there is no obligation for students to respond. Regardless, we have been able to use this data not only to revise design choices but also to update the section sequencing. While these "feedback loop" items embedded into the FWE have been useful for our developers, there are methodological

limitations for potentially validating or generalizing the data. For instance, our team has only been able to code a small amount of qualitative data, in part because of time/labor constraints and in part because of the sheer quantity of responses. It's also possible that the phrasing of the questions could have primed students, and the open-ended responses are often short and provide limited detail (Gevers & Whittig, 2019). When Gevers and Whittig presented these findings at CWPA in 2019, our team was already brainstorming future methods of collecting student input. A few possible directions included interviews with students, disparate impact analyses, and interviews with instructors (Gevers & Whittig, 2019).

The second and more recent source of data has been the implementation of a reflective writing task. Initially, the main campus FWE writing task asked students to read and respond to a brief article about the ethics of plagiarism, but in spring 2020, we changed the writing task to a reflective essay, one that asks students to reflect directly on the self-assessment process. This reflection task serves the following functions:

1. Provides students with an opportunity to practice reflective writing, such as reflecting on the self-assessment questionnaire and articulating which course best suits their needs based on the evidence they have gathered (this item is a localization by our developers, as our curriculum heavily emphasizes reflection);
2. Provides developers with descriptive insights into student experiences with the various features of the FWE, the overall process, and our curriculum; and
3. Provides developers with aggregate areas of student experiences for future studies.

These embedded opportunities for reflection demonstrate how prompts for student feedback can be incorporated into the design of the DSP without having to develop separate studies.

Conclusion

The stories told here, and the labor, research, and conversations around them, are still ongoing. Our writing program is iteratively improving its online course curriculum based on the focus group data; we still rely on usability studies to assess accessibility and engagement; and we are still collecting and reviewing data from the embedded reflection task and the optional reflection questions. But the conversations engendering these design decisions perhaps matter more: while the tools used are vital, and the ways in which they are designed have reverberating consequences, the justice-oriented frameworks of the developers have far-reaching impacts. We know these systems (as well as our students and communities) are always changing, and WPAs must be vigilant in (re)designing for equity. For DSP, that means starting with placement's key stakeholders—students.

As demonstrated above, positioning DSP as advocacy can foster more localized, accessible, and usable designs (not just localized content). UX methodologies have incredible use value for those administering placement. Designing a student self-placement system is never easy, but including students in the process can bolster localization efforts. User and usability localization are key components of TPC models, and content/construct localization has long been the priority for writing assessment; together, these approaches model a richer approach to localization that specifically attunes to students, their communities, and their needs. We frame DSP as advocacy because it seeks to actively intervene in structurally marginalizing placements. UX and participatory localization methodologies can help us better achieve those dialogic goals and make writing placement assessment less a pain and more a pleasure.

References

- Acharya, K. R. (2019). Usability for social justice: Exploring the implementation of localization usability in Global North technology in the context of a Global South's country. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 49(1), 6–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281617735842>
- Adams, P. D., Gearhart, S., Miller, R., & Roberts, A. (2009). The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing open the gates. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 28(2), 50–69. <https://doi.org/10.37514/JBW-J.2009.28.2.04>
- Adler-Kassner, L., & O'Neill, P. (2010). *Reframing writing assessment to improve teaching and learning*. Utah State University Press.
- Agboka, G. Y. (2013). Participatory localization: A social justice approach to navigating unenfranchised/disenfranchised cultural sites. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 22(1), 28–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2013.730966>
- Agboka, G. Y. (2014). Decolonial methodologies: Social justice perspectives in intercultural technical communication research. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 44(3), 297–327. <https://doi.org/10.2190/TW.44.3.e>
- Aguinis, H., Culpepper, S. A., & Pierce, C. A. (2016). Differential prediction generalization in college admissions testing. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(7), 1045–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000104>
- Aull, L. (2021). Directed self-placement: Subconstructs and group differences at a U.S. university. *Assessing Writing*, 48, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2021.100522>
- Baker-Bell, A. (2013). “I never really knew the history behind African-American language”: Critical language pedagogy in an Advanced Placement English Language Arts class. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 46(3), 355–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2013.806848>
- Balay, A., & Nelson, K. (2012). Placing students in writing classes: One university's experience with a modified version of directed self-placement. *Composition Forum*, 25. <https://www.compositionforum.com/issue/25/placing-students-modified-dsp.php>
- Behm, N., & Miller, K. D. (2012). Challenging the frameworks of color-blind racism: Why we need a fourth wave of writing assessment scholarship. In A. B. Inoue & M. Poe (Eds.), *Race and writing assessment* (pp. 127–140). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Brock, T., & Slater, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Strategies for improving postsecondary credential attainment among Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults*. The Community College Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/credential-attainment-black-hispanic-native-american-adults.html>
- Brooke, C., & Grabill, J. T. (2016). Writing is a technology through which writers create and recreate meaning. In L. Adler-Kassner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies* (pp. 32–34). Utah State University Press.
- Creative Reaction Lab. (n.d.). Our Approach: A method for co-creating equitable outcomes. <https://crxlab.org/our-approach>
- Crowley, S. (1998). *Composition in the university: Historical and polemic essays*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

- Crusan, D. (2006). The politics of implementing online directed self-placement for second language writers. In P. K. Matsuda, C. Ortmeier-Hooper, & X. You (Eds.), *The politics of second language writing: In search of the promised land* (pp. 205-221). Parlor Press.
- Crusan, D. (2011). The promise of directed self-placement for second language writers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(4), 774-780. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.272524>
- DasBender, G. (2011). Assessing Generation 1.5 learners: The revelations of directed self-placement. In N. Elliot & L. Perelman (Eds.), *Writing assessment in the 21st century: Essays in honor of Edward M. White* (pp. 371-384). Hampton Press.
- Design Justice Network. (2018). *Design justice network principles*. <https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles>
- Dixon-Román, E. J., Everson, H. T., & McArdle, J. J. (2013). Race, poverty and SAT scores: Modeling the influences of family income on Black and White high school students' SAT performance. *Teachers College Record*, 115(4), 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811311500406>
- Elbow, P., & Belanoff, P. (1986). Portfolios as a substitute for proficiency examinations. *College Composition and Communication*, 37(3), 336-339. <https://doi.org/10.2307/358050>
- Ferris, D. R., Evans, K., & Kurzer, K. (2017). Placement of multilingual writers: Is there a role for student voices? *Assessing Writing*, 32, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2016.10.001>
- Ferris, D. R., & Lombardi, A. (2020). Collaborative placement of multilingual writers: Combining formal assessment and self-evaluation. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 13(1), 1-15. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z6683m6>
- Gere, A. R., Aull, L., Green, T., & Porter, A. (2010). Assessing the validity of directed self-placement at a large university. *Assessing Writing*, 15(3), 154-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2010.08.003>
- Gere, A. R., Aull, L., Perales, M. D., Escudero, Z. L., & Vander Lei, E. (2013). Local assessment: Using genre analysis to validate directed self-placement. *College Composition and Communication*, 64(4), 605-633. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43490782>
- Gere, A. R., Curzan, A., Hammond, J. W., Hughes, S., Li, R., Moos, A., Smith, K., Van Zanen, K., Wheeler, K. L., & Zanders, C. J. (2021). Communal justicing: Writing assessment, disciplinary infrastructure, and the case for critical language awareness. *College Composition and Communication*, 72(3), 384-410. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/CCC/issues/v72-3/31160>
- Gevers, J., & Whittig, E. (2019, July 25-28). "I loved it because it is truly up to you": Student perspectives on choice and agency in directed self-placement [Conference session]. Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference, Baltimore, MD, United States.
- Gilman, H., Giordano, J. B., Hancock, N., Hassel, H., Henson, L., Hern, K., et al. (2019). Forum: Two-year college writing placement as fairness. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 12(1), 1-13. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zv0r9b2>
- Grites, T. J. (2013). Successful transitions from two-year to four-year institutions. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 162, 61-68. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20057>
- Hamraie, A. (2017). *Building access: Universal design and the politics of disability*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt79d>

- Higgins, A. (n.d.). *Redesigning the Foundations Writing Evaluation (FWE)*. <https://uxfol.io/p/alyhiggins/041b61da>
- Huot, B. (2002). *(Re)articulating writing assessment for teaching and learning*. Utah State University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nx5z>
- Inoue, A. B. (2009a). Self-assessment as programmatic center: The first-year writing program and its assessment at California State University, Fresno. *Composition Forum*, 20. <https://www.compositionforum.com/issue/20/calstate-fresno.php>
- Inoue, A. B. (2009b). The technology of writing assessment and racial validity. In C. Schreiner (Ed.), *Handbook of research on assessment technologies, methods, and applications in higher education* (pp. 97–120). Information Science Reference.
- Inoue, A. B. (2019). *Labor-based grading contracts: Building equity and inclusion in the compassionate writing classroom*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>
- Jones, E. (2008). Self-placement at a distance: Challenge and opportunities. *Writing Program Administration*, 32(1), 57–75.
- Jones, N. N. (2016). The technical communicator as advocate: Integrating a social justice approach in technical communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 46(3), 342–362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472816166639472>
- Kenner, K. (2016). Student rationale for self-placement into first-year composition: Decision making and directed self-placement. *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, 43(3), 274–289. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/TETYC/issues/v43-3/28377>
- Ketai, R. L. (2012). Race, remediation, and readiness: Reassessing the “self” in directed self-placement. In A. B. Inoue & M. Poe (Eds.), *Race and writing assessment* (pp. 142–154). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Klausman, J., & Lynch, S. (2022). From ACCUPLACER to informed self-placement at Whatcom Community College: Equitable placement as an evolving practice. In J. Nastal, M. Poe, & C. Toth (Eds.), *Writing placement in two-year colleges: The pursuit of equity in postsecondary education* (pp. 59–83). The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1565>
- Klausman, J., Toth, C., Swyt, W., Griffiths, B., Sullivan, P., Warnke, A., Williams, A. L., Giordano, J., & Roberts, L. (2016). TYCA white paper on placement reform. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 44(2), 135–157. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/tetyc/issues/v44-2/28899>
- Kryger, K., & Mitchum, C. (in press). Designing DSP: UX and the experience of online students. *Writing Program Administration* [forthcoming].
- Kynard, C. (2013). *Vernacular insurrections: Race, Black protest, and the new century in composition-literacies studies*. SUNY Press.
- Liu, B. (2020, November 1). *The UX Cookbook*. The UX Cookbook. <https://theuxcookbook.com/>
- Liscott, J. (2018), May. *Why English class is silencing students of color* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/u4dc1axRwE4>

- Mattern, K., Radunzel, J., & Harmston, M. (2016). *ACT composite score by family income*. <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1604-ACT-Composite-Score-by-Family-Income.pdf>
- Miller-Cochran, S., & Rodrigo, R. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Rhetorically rethinking usability: Theories, practices, and methodologies*. Hampton Press.
- Moos, A., & Van Zanen, K. (2019). Directed self-placement as a tool to foreground student agency. *Assessing Writing*, 41, 68–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2019.06.001>
- Moss, P. A. (1994a). Can there be validity without reliability? *Educational Researcher*, 23(2), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X023002005>
- Moss, P. A. (1994b). Validity in high stakes writing assessment: Problems and possibilities. *Assessing Writing*, 1(1), 109–128. [https://doi.org/10.1016/1075-2935\(94\)90007-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/1075-2935(94)90007-8)
- Moss, P. A. (1998). Testing the test of the test: A response to “multiple inquiry in the validation of writing tests.” *Assessing Writing*, 5(1), 111–122. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1075-2935\(99\)80008-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1075-2935(99)80008-7)
- Nastal, J., Poe, M., & Toth, C. (Eds.). (2022). *Writing placement in two-year colleges: The pursuit of equity in postsecondary education*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1565>
- Poe, M., & Inoue, A. B. (2016). Toward writing as social justice: An idea whose time has come [Special Issue Introduction]. *College English*, 79(2), 119–126. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/ce/issues/v79-2/28809>
- Poe, M., Inoue, A. B., & Elliot, N. (Eds.). (2018). *Writing assessment, social justice, and the advancement of opportunity*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2018.0155>
- Poe, M., Nastal, J., & Elliot, N. (2019). Reflection. An admitted student is a qualified student: A roadmap for writing placement in the two-year college. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 12(1). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/31c793kf>
- Rosenberg, M. J. (2016). Understanding the adult transfer student—Support, concerns, and transfer student capital. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40(12), 1058–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1216907>
- Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (1998). Directed self-placement: An attitude of orientation. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(1), 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/358352>
- Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices*. Hampton Press.
- Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (2012). The private and the public in directed self-placement. In N. Elliot & L. Perelman (Eds.), *Writing assessment in the 21st century: Essays in honor of Edward M. White* (pp. 363–369). Hampton Press.
- Saenkhum, T. (2016). *Decisions, agency, and advising: Key issues in the placement of multilingual writers into first-year composition courses*. Utah State University Press.
- Scott, T., & Inoue, A. B. (2016). Assessing writing shapes contexts and instruction. In L. Adler-Kassner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies* (Classroom ed., pp. 29–31). Utah State University Press.

- Shivers-McNair, A., & San Diego, C. (2017). Localizing communities, goals, communication, and inclusion: A collaborative approach. *Technical Communication*, 64(2), 97–112.
- Society for Technical Communication. (n.d). *Defining technical communication*. <https://www.stc.org/about-stc/defining-technical-communication/>
- Society for Technical Communication (2016). *Technical communication body of knowledge*. <https://www.tcbok.org/>
- Sun, H. (2012). *Cross-cultural technology design: Creating culture-sensitive technology for local users*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199744763.001.0001>
- Toth, C. (2018). Directed self-placement at “democracy’s open door”: Writing placement and social justice in community colleges. In M. Poe, A. B. Inoue, & N. Elliot (Eds.), *Writing assessment, social justice, and the advancement of opportunity* (pp. 137–170). The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2018.0155>
- Toth, C. (2019). Directed self-placement at two-year colleges: A kairotic moment. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 12(1), 1–18. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6g81k736>
- Toth, C., & Aull, L. (2014). Directed self-placement questionnaire design: Practices, problems, possibilities. *Assessing Writing*, 20(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2013.11.006>
- Valentine, J. C., Konstantopoulos, S., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2017). What happens to students placed into developmental education? A meta-analysis of regression discontinuity studies. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(4), 806–833. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654317709237>
- VanOra, J. (2019). “It’s like one step for me to go forward”: A longitudinal study of community college students’ perceptions on the value of developmental education. *Community College Enterprise*, 25(1), 59–76.
- White, E. M. (1985). *Teaching and assessing writing: Recent advances in understanding, evaluating, and improving student performance*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Yancey, K. B. (1999). Looking back as we look forward: Historicizing writing assessment. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(3), 483–503. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/CCC/issues/v50-3/1341>