Toward a Rhetorical Model of Directed Self-Placement

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Drawing on theories of rhetorical agency, the author argues that we rethink directed self- placement (DSP) as rhetorically distributed work that reflects collectively shaped agency within and beyond the immediate assessment ecology. To acknowledge DSP as a rhetorical act through ethical and responsible practices, the author proposes a rhetorical model of DSP that aims to fully recognize student agents' position, deliberation, negotiation, and appropriation in relation to the placement decisions, and to engage students in a "rhetorical rehearsal" before signing the placement contract.

Below is part of a conversation I had with one of my first-year writing students during an individual meeting in fall 2017. He was a sophomore from mainland China studying economics at Purdue University, a large land-grant research university in the state of Indiana. I asked him what made him decide to sign up for ENGL 106-I (first-year writing course for international students at Purdue), to which he replied:

> I thought a lot about it after I talked with my academic adviser. At first, I wanted to try ENGL 106 ("mainstream" first-year writing course at Purdue with mostly domestic enrollments), because I wanted to make some American friends and know more about how they write. I just wanted to be part of their culture. Although my TOEFL writing score barely made the cut score (26), I have read lots of English novels and been keeping a journal in English since the first day of high school. And I've been studying at Purdue for a year. So I feel if I work hard I could definitely make it. But my adviser told me in ENGL 106-I, the pace is slower and each of us would get more individual attention, I figured it might be easier than ENGL 106. And I asked my Chinese friends who took this class before, and they said it was an easy A. So I decided to sign up for ENGL 106-I. I will get 4 credits anyway.

Having scored 26 (out of 30) on TOEFL writing, he had the luxury to, through a directed self-placement system (DSP), place himself in either the mainstream FYW or one designed specifically for international students who are usually not native speakers of English. The conversation above revealed the internal debate my student underwent and the resources he mobilized to reach his final decision. He did end up completing the course exceptionally well with an A, and I could sense that he was happy with the

outcome. Yet my teacherly intuition prompted me to ask myself: Would he have achieved more and still earned an A in ENGL 106 (mainstream)? And more importantly, would he have felt happier if he had the chance to, in his words, "make some American friends and know more about how they write?"

Like hundreds of other established and well-maintained writing programs across North America, the writing program at Purdue adopted the now twenty-year-old DSP system that Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles introduced in 1998. However, there is an exception: international students with a TOEFL writing score below 26 are required to register for ENGL 106-I, as they are perceived to experience more challenges in a mainstream or accelerated section. It seems fair to claim, then, that DSP at Purdue is a "cousin" of Royer and Gilles' original model, that is, it shares some genes with the "authentic" DSP yet grows its localized restrictions.

Yet local as it may seem, the question that baffled me echoes concerns regarding DSP shared within the broader professional community of WPA scholars and practitioners. There has been a consistent line of inquiry interrogating the validity of DSP since its inception (Gere, Aull, Green, and Porter; Jones; Nicolay; Toth and Aull). Others have questioned or investigated whether or not DSP actually works in diverse institutional contexts (Harrington; Reynolds). The responses are mixed. Just like any other ambitious attempt at fundamentally restructuring the current practices, DSP has invited both enthusiasm and criticism (Blakesley). Although statistical evidence points to DSP's lack of strong validity (Gere, Aull, Green, and Porter), I tend to see the complication regarding current practices of DSP, however, as rhetorical in nature, that is, it is caused by lack of effective communication or by miscommunication between different stakeholders. As a consequence, in practices of DSP, there typically exists a tacit misalignment between the intended or claimed effects of a writing program's DSP guidance and the actual rationale behind students' self-placement decisions. In other words, although we expect and believe that students make their placement decisions based on the guidance we provide—one that is intended to familiarize students with course configurations and curricula and prompt students to critically reflect on their literacy experiences—our students, in reality, usually base their judgment on complex and even completely irrelevant reasons, for example, the ease of getting an A, the likability of the instructor, and the demographic makeup of the class, as suggested by ample anecdotal evidence. Further, their sources of information are not limited to the guidance we provide them with; rather, students have more street smarts than we think they do when it comes to leveraging their social networks to get advice (Saenkhum). Simply put, students may not be who we think they

are or do what we think they do in DSP practices. The question is, therefore, not exclusively about a priori validity. Rather, how do we justify our well-intentioned and well-orchestrated offering of placement guidance and reclaim the rhetorical power of the term "directed" or "informed" (Bedore and Rossen-Knill)? How do we share rhetorical agency and responsibility with students rather than grant them agency and hand over the responsibility? Ultimately, how do we rethink and re-articulate DSP in Kathleen Blake Yancey's words, "as rhetorical act that is both humane and ethical?" (485).

In this essay, drawing on theories of rhetorical agency, I argue that we rethink DSP as rhetorically distributed work that reflects collectively shaped agency within and beyond the immediate assessment ecology. The "direction" in DSP is but one ecological resource that mediates and is appropriated by student agents to make placement decisions, while the "self" in DSP is but the student agent that ultimately signs the paperwork. The actual decision-making process is always grounded in distributed work that involves "dialectic interactions and collective negotiation" (Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni 166) between and among not only stakeholders but also people in expanded social networks. To do so, I propose a rhetorical model of DSP that aims to fully recognize student agent's position, deliberation, negotiation, and appropriation in relation to the placement decision, and to engage the student in a "rhetorical rehearsal" before signing the placement contract.

I begin with a review of the development and assumptions of DSP in current scholarship while situating the discussion in theories of rhetorical agency. Then, I introduce the rhetorical model of DSP, describing what it entails and projecting its programmatic consequences. Lastly, I illustrate the rhetorical model of DSP with modified DSP procedures at Purdue to concretize and contextualize it with attention to administrative and material affordances and constraints.

DSP and Rhetorical Agency

Royer and Gilles designed and experimented with the prototype of DSP at Grand Valley State University twenty years ago in response to the pervasive frustration over the traditional placement tests for their questionable reliability and validity or artificiality and for the fact that they are materially costly to administrators and emotionally costly to students and instructors ("Directed"). Essentially, DSP frees instructors from reading students' placement essays and make placement decisions for them by inviting students to make their own choices based on their self-awareness of their literacy history. The three benefits Royer and Gilles identify—DSP feels right,

DSP works, and DSP pleases everyone involved—may seem too intuitive to adequately justify any radical programmatic reconfiguration. Yet the innovative and timely reconceptualization of agency involved in academic placement practices found its appeal in the professional community at large, so much so that it turned into a moral imperative that inspired many writing programs to follow suit.

As this placement method evolves, it takes on a variety of forms and standards in diverse institutional and programmatic settings. Departing from Royer and Gilles' original fourteen statements that are intended to guide students' self-assessment, program directors across the country have made various attempts to modify, localize, and enhance the assessment instruments. Examples include the English Placement Questionnaire that Anne Balay and Karl Nelson try to validate, which generates a score and recommendation for the student, and the Writer's Profile introduced by Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Jeff Sommers, and John Paul Tassoni, which prompts students to compile a portfolio of reflections on their literacy history for faculty to make placement recommendations. Although students are autonomous to different degrees during the decision-making process, they would take responsibility for the final decision, which has been the universal hallmark of DSP. In other words, regardless of the level of directive intervention a student receives, the fact that the student is the one who closes the deal defines DSP. In this sense, agency as traditionally understood as conscious intention or free will to cause changes is claimed to be given back to students.

The operative assumptions underlying DSP practices foreground this traditional notion of agency. For example, the fundamental assumption, as Ed White aptly puts, is that "students will be mature enough to choose the course that is right for them, if they have enough information and pressure to choose wisely" (vii). Agency here entails not only the free will to make decisions but also the competence to make the "right" decisions. It is premised upon the confidence of WPAs and instructors who are experienced and knowledgeable in the particular profession of teaching writing yet who know less about the students as individual agents than the students themselves. To build confidence, they need to create the right ecological condition that grounds students' decision making. This assumption implies that DSP has been primarily constructed upon a transactional model that involves exchanges of resources and signing contracts based on mutual trust. The writing program provides students with guidance and grants them the right to select the most suitable course in exchange for their informed decisions. The effect is to reduce the financial expenses on the program's side while pleasing both parties.

Righteous as applauding student's agentic action may sound, however, agency "does not exist in a vacuum but is exercised in a social world in which structure shapes the opportunities and resources available to individuals" (Cleaver 226). It is not something that is given to students, let alone being given back to students. Rather, agency is only manifested through dialogic interactions between students and academic advisers and writing teachers. As Marilyn Cooper notes, invoking Thomas Rickert, students confronted with placement decisions are already agents: "what we need is not a pedagogy of empowerment, but a pedagogy of responsibility" (Cooper 443). In this case, it is necessary to frame the notion of agency in rhetorical terms: "agency is a fundamental property of rhetoric: we can debate the discourse of an interlocutor through resort to argumentation" (Turnbull 207). As Carolyn R. Miller points out, agency is detached from the agent in poststructuralist or posthumanist theories as opposed to being treated as a possession. She goes on to suggest that we rethink agency "as the *kinetic energy* of rhetorical performance" that is "positioned exactly between the agent's capacity and the effect on an audience" (Miller 147). Agency is always in a state of becoming between the doing and what has been done and among co-doers rather than doers and do-ees.

The process of a student creating an individual DSP profile, negotiating desires and reservations with advisers, and eventually making the placement decision resembles a micro cultural ecology that involves multiple co-doers leveraging material and social resources and interacting with each other. Agency in this cultural ecology is dispersed, shared, and co-constructed rhetorical performance. The mutual goal of the intervention is, as Balay and Nelson succinctly put it, "to determine which level of writing class will be most helpful to any given student, ensuring he or she receives all the writing preparation needed, without wasting the student's time and money in courses that aren't personally necessary." Successfully achieving this goal is dependent upon not only an alignment between resources contributed from both parties—comprehensive course information from the writing program and literacy history from the student, but also a transparent and effective rhetorical negotiation—the student's justification of a certain self-placement decision. Rhetorical negotiation becomes especially critical when misalignment or discrepancies occur, for example, when students' decisions are made not based on their critical understanding of themselves and the curricula, but based on irrelevant factors or anecdotal evidence from people outside the cultural ecology. This is the moment when agency emerges as collectively shaped "*kinetic energy* of rhetorical performance" that engages the co-doers in an act of realignment (Miller 147).

The DSP models introduced or critiqued in the literature recognize the dispersed, shared, and co-constructed rhetorical agency to varying degrees. For example, Royer and Gilles' original DSP model has limited space for negotiation beyond declaring their placement choices ("Directed"). Moving toward the more dialectic end of the continuum, Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni's Writer's Profile placement program at Miami University experiments with a shifted power dynamic, namely, making placement decisions with students as opposed to doing so to or for students (173). Students need to, when preparing for the Writer's Profile, "become rhetors in the strong meaning of the term, engaging in a dialectical transaction with their audience (writing teachers), in a specific situation, for a specific purpose, in order to produce a practical action" (172). Pamela Bedore and Deborah F. Rossen-Knill's advocacy of a dialogic model of "informed self-placement (ISP)" at the University of Rochester takes the notion of shared responsibility a step further. They believe that giving students a choice should be "equivalent to students receiving the choice as it was intended" (Bedore and Rossen-Knill 56). In practice, the ISP adds to its essential procedures student-adviser meetings—"advisers do not simply accept a student's statement; they enter into constructive dialogue with the student so that the student may make an informed course selection" (Bedore and Rossen-Knill 59).

The evolution of the DSP model over the past twenty years shows a trajectory of a giant step forward toward a democratic model plus a few adjustments and adaptations. The initial enthusiasm about students' "full" autonomy has waned, and stakeholders in charge have begun to share more responsibility through various operative interventions. Yet despite the "dialogic turn" in the evolution of DSP programs, the notion of agency is still discursively constructed as a de facto property of each individual student, that is, agency is still seen as something granted to students, or so as it appears, as opposed to an emerging embodiment during interactions. This developmental trend is evidenced in Christie Toth and Laura Aull's analysis of the DSP instruments used in U.S. universities. Accompanying the dialogic turn is the realization and renewed notion of shared responsibility yet not agency. The consequences of this in practices are, for one, the DSP instruments usually created by writing programs to offer intervention, such as a detailed guidance brochure and a questionnaire that generates recommendations, may be theoretically sound but functionally dismissible. Namely, they may not be used by students in an informed and responsible way, sometimes not even in an institutionally intended way, since students may take their granted agency for granted. Second, writing programs and instructors may have students practice their shared responsibility by plac-

ing themselves in the right, or a "more right" class, and collect ample information about students through DSP and make responsible recommendations, yet they may not engage students in a rhetorical act of performing their emergent agency to consciously and proactively justify their placement decisions. I would like to note here, though, the potential consequences of a traditional view of agency in practices of DSP do not serve as counterarguments against the efficiency and efficacy of current models of DSP; they still feel right, work, and please everyone involved. However, not attending to the consequences may reinforce and perpetuate the view that "on the whole WPAs may have greatly underestimated the ethical and moral complexity of writing placement, even as we have worked so hard to show the value of ensuring that students take the course that will best help them become successful writers in the university and beyond" (Blakesley 10).

The ethical and moral complexity has been foregrounded in the unfolding discussion about the social justice implications of writing assessment and placement, which scholars call the "fourth wave" of writing assessment (Behm and Miller), "sociocultural models of validity" (Poe and Inoue), or the "ethical turn" in writing assessment (Kelly-Riley and Whithaus), particularly in the context of institutional diversity and internationalization. Some scholars argue that by granting students agency, DSP "has the potential to supplant placement practices that have long privileged White, middle-class students, fostering more equitable writing assessment that advances social justice goals" (Toth 2019, 2; see also Gomes; Inoue; Kenner; Ketai). Yet others express their reservations about shifting the responsibility completely onto students, since structurally disadvantaged students, such as multilingual writers, may "have been negatively informed by their histories with school-based assessment, histories often shaped by race, ethnicity, language background, class, gender, age, and/or (dis)ability" (Toth 2019, 2; see also Das Bender; Schendel and O'Neil; Toth, 2018). Thinking along the lines of the recent ethical concerns, we need to further interrogate the placement practices that sponsor the granting of agency and shifting of responsibility and take stock of the consequences of the rhetorical performance required. Therefore, I argue that we acknowledge DSP as a rhetorical act by building upon the current dialogic model and inventing a rhetorical model of DSP.

A Rhetorical Model of DSP

A rhetorical model of DSP reasserts the "responsive nature of [rhetorical] agency," the type of agency that "supports deliberative democracy" (Cooper 422). It does not grant agency as a property; rather, it provides fair and ethi-

cal means for students to perform emerging rhetorical agency. It views the negotiation between traditional power-holders (programs, writing instructors, academic advisers) and students as multiple parties entering the same rhetorical ecology and agreeing to perform agency in a reciprocal and ethical manner. It is premised upon different rhetorical stances that multiple parties are inclined to take and defend. It also attends to social and material consequences of students' placement decisions by integrating a discourse of responsibility into negotiation.

In practice, writing programs would engage students in a rhetorical act of what I call "rhetorical rehearsal"—a trial performance of rhetorical positioning, deliberation, negotiation, and appropriation before making high stakes decisions (see figure 1). Specifically, students begin with rhetorical positioning, that is, articulating and justifying their philosophical, cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary position. This first step may seem too demanding for first-year students to accomplish effectively or meaningfully, yet regardless, it prepares students for higher-level engagement with the rhetorical defense of the rehearsal. Then, the processes of deliberation and negotiation prompt students to take an initial stance in terms of placement options based on their self-positioning and make a case for it through informed negotiation. Further, to substantiate the argument for their self-declared placement, students appropriate multiple types of resources—their own literacy history, DSP instructional packet, people in their immediate or distant network, etc.—and look for evidence to support their DSP decision. The four rhetorical components are interdependent and complementary to each other, as they together make up a coherent rhetorical rehearsal that helps both the student who's making the placement decision and the writing program who's executing the decision. However, it's worth noting that students may rarely rehearse the four rhetorical components in a linear fashion and may do so recursively. For example, a student may come with some knowledge of the course curricula and configurations obtained from people in their social network who have taken first-year writing. In this case, the student might make an intuitive decision first without careful self-positioning, then deliberates it through appropriation, and comes back to positioning themselves in relation to the decision. The student would also have the freedom to re-deliberate their decision if they find it challenging to claim coherence.

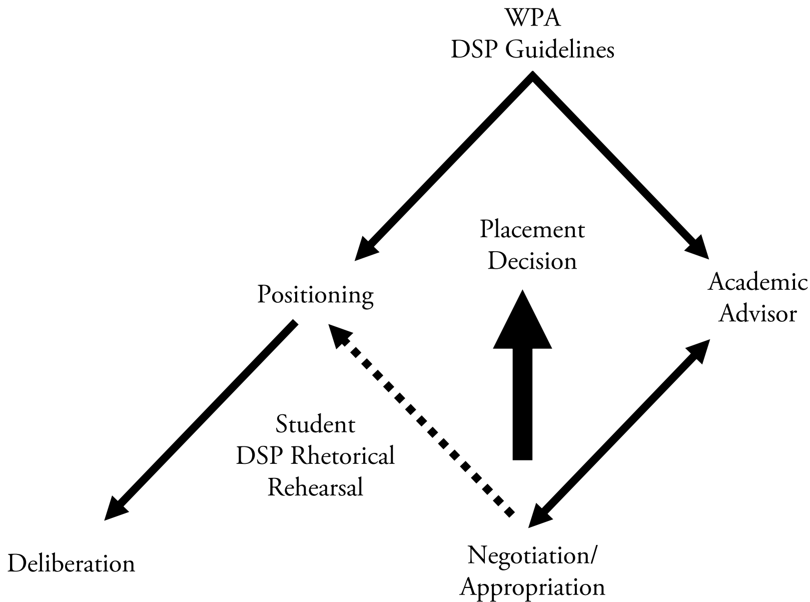

Figure 1. The rhetorical model of directed self-placement.

The rhetorical model of DSP seeks to provide a heuristic for students to responsibly practice their emergent rhetorical agency. Therefore, it requires more meaningful work from students. During a DSP rhetorical rehearsal session, the writing program will distribute to each student a digital packet that contains the instructions—usually an introduction to the program and curriculum, a typical DSP questionnaire collecting students' basic information about students' literacy history, a prompt that guides students to write a literacy history essay that complements the questionnaire, and a prompt that directs students to defend their placement decisions. The deliverables of a rhetorical rehearsal session include the completed literacy history questionnaire, a brief literacy history essay, and a justification essay. Students will present the deliverables in the form of a DSP profile to their trained academic advisers, who will then review their profiles and revise placement recommendations. It may seem that the responsibility is shifting from students to their academic advisers, who are more structurally privileged and powerful than novice students within the institution. However, I would like to contend that the responsibility is distributed across different stakeholders—students, writing program administrators, and academic advisers—within the rhetorical ecology where negotiations take place. The "twin fundamentals" of DSP, which are guidance and choice as Toth (2019) calls

them, remain intact. Negotiation, the third fundamental, is what distinguishes the rhetorical model of DSP.

Through rhetorical rehearsal, students essentially participate in an intensive training session in which they practice synthesizing sources of information and making a case for their placement decision that bears consequences. It creates its own cultural ecology where rhetorical agency emerges in communicative interactions and is shared between the rhetor (students) and audience (academic advisers and the writing program). This cultural ecology provides affordances and a certain level of institutional pressure for students to learn and grasp the distinctions between course curricula, enter meaningful and responsible negotiations with the administrative staff, justify and defend their stance, and ultimately make choices optimal for maximum educational gains. The writing program, on the other hand, may avert making placement decisions based on "arbitrary, class-marked, or simply irrelevant criteria" rather than "the real needs of each student" (Balay and Nelson), ensure that the intended or claimed effects of a writing program's DSP guidance and the actual rationale behind students' self-placement decisions are aligned through negotiation, and claim the shared agency that would more effectively justify the value of DSP in the face of institutional resistance.

An Institutional Example

Purdue has a total undergraduate enrollment of 32,672 as of fall 2018 (Purdue University Undergraduate Admissions). Each semester, around 2,000 students enroll in approximately 100 sections of first-year writing to fulfill the university's writing requirement. These sections are divided into three placement options: ENGL 106, ENGL 106-I, or ENGL 108. The majority (about 50 sections) are ENGL 106, which is the mainstream 4-credit section. ENGL 106-I follows a curriculum designed specifically to meet international students' needs, such as assistance with composing in their second or additional language—English—and with basic writing conventions in the U.S. academic context. I should note that this group of international undergraduate students accounts for 14% of the entire undergraduate student body, and the majority of them come from China, India, and South Korea (Purdue University, *International*). ENGL 106-I also bears 4 credit hours, and the writing program usually opens about a dozen sections each semester. ENGL 108 (accelerated first-year writing) is designed to challenge more advanced students through a faster-paced and more intensive curriculum. Since it bears 3 credit hours rather than 4, students spend less time in the classroom and more time doing independent work to meet slightly

higher expectations. The three different placement options use different syllabus approaches and assignments with different focuses; however, they all prepare students to meet the same program-wide learning outcomes, and all satisfy the university's writing requirement.

The writing program at Purdue adopted a directed self-placement system in 2003 to help students enroll in their appropriate sections. Before signing up, students may consult their academic advisers about specific course options, requirements, and expectations. Alternatively, they may also follow a set of guidelines to determine the appropriate placement. Despite Brian Huot's caution that standardized tests measure similar social and environmental factors more than they measure writing ability ("Towards" 167), the guidelines for international students foreground their standardized test scores and their literacy experiences in English, as the writing program still values the validity of the test scores in conveying information about students' language proficiency, given the particular institutional demographic makeup. As I noted previously, international students whose TOEFL writing score is below 26 are normally prevented from registering for ENGL 106, which suggests that a certain number of students are denied agency to make placement decisions because of their perceived language proficiency. Yet when students do have autonomy in choosing a section, they tend to be conservative and go below what instructors think they are capable of accomplishing, which leads to the misalignment evidenced in the opening anecdote. The misalignment could also be ascribed to the lack of meaningful and responsible negotiation between students and their advisers. The rhetorical model of DSP, therefore, can be productively localized and applied to the reconfiguration of the current DSP system at Purdue. Next, I will illustrate the rhetorical model of DSP with a description of a set of contextualized procedures. Please note although the instruments have been fully designed, they have not been piloted in the present writing program to obtain outcomes data.

Questionnaire

As David Blakesley argues, "the placement of students in university composition courses is fundamentally an act of socialization" (9). In other words, placement is identity work. How do we provide just enough intervention so that students can identify groups that share not only similar literacy backgrounds but also similar goals? How do we make sure that our students identify groups where they can make new connections and receive new perspectives? To answer these questions, we need to work toward a clearer picture of who they are and with what they usually struggle. It is also cru-

cial to determine the relationship between students and the curriculum, and students' relative distance from the learning outcomes, as the validity of the placement procedure is tied to and affects curriculum (Moss and Huot). The first component of a rhetorical is, then, a DSP questionnaire that's intended to collect basic information on students' literacy history. The appendix presents a sample DSP questionnaire developed in the context of Purdue. The questionnaire would help both the student and their academic advisers to make an initial judgment about the relationship between the student and the curriculum. It would also provide valuable data for the writing program administrative staff to assess the program and improve the curriculum.

The questionnaire took into account the student demographic information and literacy history at my particular institution and the program course outcomes, as an alignment between the two would yield effective recommendations that help students identify the most appropriate social group. Christie Toth and Laura Aull's corpus investigation of thirty-four DSP questionnaires is also conducive to the development of our local instrument, as it offers an overview of the most frequently adopted and operationalized concepts, such as reading practices/abilities, genre knowledge/experiences, and research, etc. They also identified the most frequently measured dimensions, such as prior academic literacy experiences/practices, self-beliefs, and feeling/attitudes.

The questionnaire includes ten questions that cover the concepts of literacy history, genre awareness, rhetorical awareness, research, collaborative writing, multimodal and digital composing, attitude toward writing, and academic writing conventions. Each item is scored on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = low; 3 = high). An incoming student will take the questionnaire online a week prior to the beginning of orientation, and sum the scores after completing the questionnaire. The resulting score will point the student to one of the three placement options. However, the placement option that results from the questionnaire is merely a recommendation. The student is entitled to following or dismissing the recommendation.

Literacy History Essay

Upon completing the questionnaire, which is intended to help students with self-positioning within the cultural ecology, students will then be prompted to reflect on their literacy history in more detail as a means of generating substance for their DSP argument. This process will take three days. The prompt reads as follows:

A prerequisite for placing yourself in the first-year writing course that will help you make the most gains is knowing yourself. This includes knowing your strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and knowing where you are coming from and where you are going. To help you know yourself better, we would invite you to write a 300-word essay describing your writer's experiences within the next three days. If you are not sure where to start, try framing your essay around these open-ended questions:

1. When did you start writing longer passages beyond sentences? What types of writing have you done? Academic papers? Diaries? Letters? Short stories? Narratives? Poems?

2. What types of writing are you good at? And what types of writing do you enjoy doing? Why?

3. How do you think your previous writing experiences would help you succeed in college first-year writing class?

4. What do you want to accomplish by taking first-year writing?

The process of composing this essay may engage students in active, deliberate, and critical self-assessment and presentation. First of all, students need to actively search for and select experiences with reading and writing that are relevant to the questions. This process reinforces students' emerging understanding of what qualities matter in composing in the context of a U.S. college. Further, the act of presenting the results to their academic adviser entails performing their lived experiences for an unfamiliar audience, which would activate the performers' existing rhetorical intuition. Mapped onto the rhetorical model of DSP, this stage still largely prioritizes students' self-positioning. Yet it also begins to call for students' rhetorical deliberation in the process of inventing the writer's profile, which contributes warrant that could be invoked when textually negotiating DSP decisions.

The literacy history essay, in addition, constitutes a powerful tool to battle against racialized assessment standards and practices that are said to reify and reinscribe whiteness and privilege (Behm and Miller). These essays invite students to perform their rhetorical differences (racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, class) through reliving their histories on their own terms, create "a site of meaningful dialogue about students' lived experiences," and maintain other stakeholders' (administrators and advisers) sensibility to students' emerging and contingent differences involved in their decision-making (Wang 409).

Program and Curriculum Descriptions and Justification Essay

The defining feature of a DSP rhetorical rehearsal is its inclusion of a justification essay, in which the student articulates the rationale for choosing a particular course and substantiates the claim with evidence from the literacy history essay and the program and curriculum descriptions. Through composing the justification essay, students rehearse their emerging rhetorical agency with their academic advisers and the writing program, rather than for them. They also assume a defensive position by yielding their right to making a "silent" placement decision behind the scene and turning their rationale from invisible to transparent. On the other hand, it functions as a formal invitation to negotiation—students invite their academic advisers to enter a responsible negotiation with them through well-orchestrated rhetorical performance so that the invitees confidently buy in to their placement, as opposed to advisers handing over the responsibility to students. If deemed unfit, a placement decision could be questioned, in which case the student would either write and submit an appeal or adhere to the adviser's recommendation. This process will take another three days. Here's the justification essay prompt that provides guidance:

> You have completed the questionnaire and the literacy history essay, so we can safely assume that you have come to a better understanding of who you are as a writer and what writer's quality we value at Purdue. Now, we would invite you to carefully read the Writing Program DSP guidelines you will find in the attachment, and write a 300-word essay stating your placement decision, articulating your rationale for making this decision, and providing evidence to support your claims. Here are some tips for providing stronger evidence and composing an effective justification essay:
>
> 1. Refer to the questionnaire and the literacy history essay as well as the DSP guidelines, look for matches between your previous literacy experiences and the expectations of your intended course option. Then make a claim as to how that particular experience has prepared you for meeting the expectation.
>
> 2. Be specific. With the 300-word limit, you only get to focus on a few key points. However, you should try to provide concrete evidence to support each point.
>
> 3. Think thoroughly and argue convincingly. Your purpose is to make an informed placement decision and demonstrate to your

academic adviser that you made the right decision and that you are responsible for it.

To prepare for this document, students will need to, first, be unambiguous about their placement option. It is often the case that a student feels like taking on some challenges by opting for a relatively more demanding course for them, for example, an international student with lower English language proficiency as indicated by standardized test scores choosing a regular ENGL 106, or a domestic student with less experience writing for multiple rhetorical situations choosing the accelerated ENGL 108. However, due to various reasons such as peer pressure, they end up staying in their "comfort zone." Having to clearly state their placement decision in the justification essay may not incentivize them to take on more challenges while potentially compromising their course grade, but will provoke them into exercising their rhetorical agency more responsibly through this institutionally structured practice. Second, the justification essay itself serves as a site of negotiation where students showcase their rhetorical strategies prior to taking first-year writing and where writing program staff and faculty get to collect qualitative information about students' general rhetorical preparedness. Third, academic advisers may practice rhetorical agency through textual negotiation when they see discrepancies between the students' experiences and the course expectations. They will assume the responsibility to fairly and ethically read students' DSP packet, and ensure that students make informed decisions rather than rushed ones out of irrelevant factors. All DSP packets will be submitted to students' respective academic advisers by the first day of the orientation for advisers to review. Submitting the DSP packet marks the end of the rhetorical rehearsal.

There may be cases in which certain ill-prepared students attempt a more demanding course or, more likely, well-prepared students place themselves in a less demanding course just for the possibility of getting an "easy" A. When such cases arise during the screening of students' DSP packets, academic advisers have the authority and responsibility to notify the students that their decisions are not approved while recommending a new placement option. Upon receiving such notifications, students may choose to submit an appeal letter, in which they confirm their decision, and provide new evidence to support it. A DSP appeals committee formed by experienced writing program staff will help the academic advisers to make the final decision based on students' appeal letters. Alternatively, students may choose to modify their placement decision based on their advisers' recommendations. In sum, through self-positioning, deliberation, negotiation, appropriation, and post-rehearsal appeal, students are empowered and guided to perform

their rhetorical agency with other stakeholders within the cultural ecology of DSP. Their decisions are ultimately their own, yet the process of reaching them involves shared responsibility and distributed agency.

Implementing a rhetorical model of DSP also calls for meaningful collaboration and coordination between writing programs and academic advisers. By "meaningful," I'm referring to the type of collaboration and coordination that would ultimately optimize students' educational experiences through well-articulated distribution of labor and transparent sharing of expertise between and among multiple stakeholders. For example, as the stakeholder that oversees and administers the DSP program and has the expertise and authority to collect and interpret data, the writing program at the university should be held accountable for providing various forms of training and consultation programs to academic advisers who are directly in contact with students. Academic advisers should be encouraged to share first-hand qualitative data and students' feedback with the writing program, which would be instrumental in sustaining and updating the DSP program.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the innate limitations of the institutional example. To begin with, as I mentioned above, the fully developed DSP instruments have yet to be piloted to yield meaningful data that support the projected outcomes. Various types of empirical evidence need to be collected to evaluate the rhetorical model of DSP, for example, placement outcomes, students' DSP profile, course grades, semester-end survey to be taken by students and course instructors, and interviews with selected key informants including students, instructors, writing program administrators, and academic advisers. Further, the instruments and procedures demonstrated were constructed within the institutional context of Purdue with its particular institutional culture, demographic makeup, curriculum setup, and program configuration taken into consideration. Other programs attempting to localize the model are encouraged to modify or completely revamp the instruments that acknowledge the rhetorically distributed work, create ethical rhetorical engagement, and empower students to make meaningful placement choices.

Conclusion

As Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy lament, "Despite considerable lip service to Ernest Boyer's concept of the scholarship of application, for writing studies faculty and researchers, it remains difficult to persuade senior administrators and decision makers to value our scholarly expertise for on-campus application, particularly when the issue is seen as potentially

politically complicated or costly—as is the case with placement" (519). For senior administrators to buy in to a less costly DSP program is relatively less complicated; as Royer and Gilles note, it pleases administrators as it saves time and resources that would otherwise be spent on organizing placement exams or justifying the placement results ("Directed"). Yet to convince administrators to buy in to the implementation of a rhetorical model of DSP, admittedly, may not be as straightforward. The change may likely encounter the same old institutional resistance Blakesley has discussed extensively: for one, placement is "an expression of institutional ideology with deep roots in cultural presumptions about education" (15); and second, "the magnitude of the change and the number of people needed to make it work" (16). Shared responsibility and distributed agency may sound politically enticing as these concepts take us a step further toward the ideal of democratic education. However, by mandating the procedure of a rhetorical rehearsal where students are required to justify their position and are held accountable for possible re-placement, the institution is reclaiming a certain level of control. Nonetheless, I would argue that this redistribution of power, if done in accordance with the local ideological and material condition, would make a healthy adjustment pragmatically. Our claim that the traditional DSP model benefits students is predicated upon the assumption that students know themselves better than we do and are thus more likely to make the right or more right placement decision. Yet today's Higher Ed institutions are almost universally characterized by diverse and complex demographic makeup. As a consequence, our assumption no longer holds true. We become skeptical about students' choices that are motivated and mediated by their different and even sometimes conflicting desires, values, and beliefs. This is because although students' decisions are rhetorical in nature, the process of rhetorical decision-making is behind the scene. By foregrounding rhetorical negotiation and holding students accountable for their decisions, the rhetorical model of DSP assembles all stakeholders—the WPA, students, academic advisers—as well as their distinct knowledge and expertise: the WPA knows what curriculum provides appropriate scaffolding but does not necessarily know who the students are and what they want; students know what they want but do not necessarily know what the writing program expects of them; academic advisers know what role writing likely plays in students' careers but do not necessarily know what curriculum maximizes the potential. The outcome, then, is a rhetorically rehearsed and negotiated collective placement decision that all stakeholders are responsible for, and ultimately benefits everyone involved.

Institutional resistance may also come from questions regarding the validity of the DSP model. Huot lays out the principles for a new theory

and practice of writing assessment in an attempt to reclaim the expertise of writing assessment as a rhetoric and composition scholar. The principles, which include "site-based," "locally controlled," "context-sensitive," "rhetorically based," and "accessible" (*(Re)articulating* 105), foreground the notion of localization against the backdrop of the pursuit of valid and reliable standardized tests. Following the same line of inquiry, Patricia Lynne proposes to replace the terms of "reliability" and "validity" with "meaningfulness" and "ethics" to "highlight the context of assessment and the relationships among those involved in the assessment" (117). Despite these scholars' efforts to reclaim the expertise of writing assessment, however, administrators at large institutions, especially those with a neoliberal orientation that prioritizes the pursuit of "excellence" (Readings), may frown upon claims about non-measurable validity, since it would be rather difficult to track progress or make comparisons. Making a case for the rhetorical model of DSP may even encounter more resistance, given that a modified yet still mainstream DSP has been shown to not predict student success as well as simple standardized test scores do in a local context (Balay and Nelson). Not surprisingly, the notion of "student success" is operationalized as students' first-year writing grades. I wonder, however, if the only criterion for a "valid" placement method is that it accurately places students in a classroom where they can get grades of a B or higher. To make a strong case for meaningful and ethical placement practices in response to the reductive view of the validity of DSP as only represented by scores and grades, we do, nonetheless, need to collect ample data at the programmatic level to justify the changes we propose (Blakesley). The DSP instruments designed based on the rhetorical model well fulfill this purpose in that they collect not only valuable quantitative and qualitative data that would inform us of students' self-perceptions and literacy histories, but also data that would indicate meaningful and ethical negotiations between and among different stakeholders.

The most compelling reason for institutional inertia, however, may be its higher consumption of resources—financial cost, time, and labor. The institution needs to be willing to support programmatic collaboration between the writing program and academic advisers in the disciplines. The writing program needs to provide sufficient training for academic advisers and ongoing consultation. The academic advisers, too, need to invest considerable time and labor. Given the current political economy of higher education, no doubt, it's a difficult argument to make. In response, we as WPA scholars and practitioners need to not only crowdsource expertise, experiences, and best practices with respect to economically and efficiently materializing the rhetorical model of DSP in the age of austerity, for exam-

ple, building an online management system and interface to distribute and store materials and maintain communications between different parties, but also, and more importantly, tie the argument for a rhetorical model of DSP into the bigger conversation regarding the role of composition in the university, for example, contributing to educational equity and scaffolding students' academic socialization.

In a word, situating the work within an institutional environment that values accurate, right, and affordable placement at the same time, no doubt, requires more of the writing program's efforts. Regardless, I believe it is valuable work. DSP is no panacea, as Royer and Gilles cautioned. And the rhetorical model of DSP is not intended to simplify the placement method; rather, it's meant to complicate it, and it would give rise to new problems. Yet White provides us with the reassurance that "the new problems are those that postsecondary education should be meeting anyway: helping students take responsibility for their own learning, replacing reductive placement testing with sound counseling, developing clear curricular guidelines and outcomes, and becoming less paternal and more, shall we say, avuncular" (viii).

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APPENDIX: INTRODUCTORY COMPOSITION DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

These questions are intended to aid you in selecting a first-year writing course that meets your needs. Please bear in mind that the results only provide you with a recommendation. Based on the recommendation, you

will need to negotiate your placement decision with your academic adviser. The questions apply to both the U.S. context and contexts outside the U.S.; however, we assume any variety of English as the main language for these literacy activities.

TOEFL total score/writing score (if applicable): ________

1. I read books, newspapers, or magazines

On a daily basis	3
On a monthly basis	2
Rarely or never	1

2. English has been the medium of instruction

For all of my high school courses	3
For less than half of my high school courses	2
For none of my high school courses	1

3. I keep a journal or write blog post

On a regular basis for a long period of time	3
On a regular basis for a short period of time OR, occasionally for a long period of time	2
Occasionally or never	1

4. In high school, I wrote different types of writing for different teachers

Regularly	3
Sometimes	2
Rarely or never	1

5. When I write, I think about what my readers expect and what effects my writing would create

Always	3
Sometimes	2
Rarely or never	1

6. I have completed writing tasks for which I needed to base my ideas on others' works or on evidence I needed to look for by myself

Often	3
Occasionally	2
Never	1

7. I have worked with my peers on a single piece of document for a specific purpose

More than twice	3
Once or twice	2
Never	1

8. I am proficient at using computers and other digital tools to write

Very proficient	3
Somewhat proficient	2
Not proficient	1

9. I like reading and writing in general

Very	3
Not so much, but I want to practice	2
I don't like reading and writing	1

10. I'm familiar with basic U.S. academic writing conventions

Very	3
Somewhat	2
Not really	1

Your total score: _________

Recommendations

- If you score between 26 and 30 (including 26), you may consider registering for ENGL 108;
- If you score between 16 and 25 (including 16 and 25), you may consider registering for ENGL 106;
- If you score between 10 and 15 (including 10 and 15), and English is your second or additional language, you may consider registering for ENGL 106-I.