Q&A: Practical Advice from the Field

Clark McKown

One of the four goals of the Assessment Work Group is to identify and help stimulate the market for performance assessments of students' social and emotional competence. To that end, it has sponsored an annual Design Challenge for the past two years. The following excerpts are drawn from a late August 2018 webinar (see links at the end of this Q&A), featuring the top three winners of the 2nd Design Challenge, supplemented by a follow-up interview with Clark McKown (Rush University Medical Center), one of the two co-leaders of the Design Challenge effort.

Details, including blogs from the winners and background information about the Assessment Work Group and its broad cross-section of participants, can be found at measuringsel.casel.org.

What are the goals of the Design Challenge?

Clark McKown: By identifying and recognizing award-winning efforts, we're hoping to stimulate the development and adoption of direct assessments of social-emotional competence supporting effective instruction and positive student development. These will build on the more common tools currently in use, such as student, teacher, and parent surveys and teacher observations.

What's different this year?

McKown: Based on feedback from last year's initial Design Challenge, we wanted to address more directly the assessment priorities of teachers and other practitioners. To that end, we asked practitioners to identify their highest needs. From the more than 60 submissions, we selected the 10 most compelling and actionable requests. These ranged from assessments that measure the effectiveness of morning meetings in elementary school to those that help determine if high school students are well-prepared for college and careers, including interpersonal competencies and problem-solving in new or unexpected situations.

We think involving practitioners will strengthen the field. They are uniquely positioned to explain the real-world performance challenges and to help us anticipate assessment needs and realities. That way, test developers can bake these lessons into their designs.

What criteria did you use to select this year's winners?

McKown: We had several criteria and a scoring rubric, but, above all, we were looking for designs that responded directly to practitioners' requests and priorities. We were looking for everything from early concepts to fully developed and validated assessments. We wanted to shine the spotlight on really good ideas, even if they were more a vision than fully fleshed out at this point.

What did you find?
McKown: A wide range of ideas. Democracy Prep is in the very early brainstorming phase. Its vision, using scenarios to aggregate and present important SEL data, clearly was driven by what would be most informative in the classroom. The submission from Rutgers University was further along. It is research-based, focused on presenting data in multidimensional ways that teachers can use as a formative assessment to make curriculum and instructional decisions. The third, the Virtual Environment for Vision Information Processing, from a close colleague of mine, is much farther along. It has done a large field trial with 1,300 students. The panel was intrigued by its use of avatar-based characters to engage students.

A Closer Look at the Top 3 Submissions

1. Selected Response Assessment of Social-Emotional Competence
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

What are you planning?
Dr. Ryan J. Kettler: We'll be using scenario-based, multiple-choice questions to help distinguish why students from kindergarten through grade 5 behave as they do.

For example, Maria doesn't initiate new relationships. Why not? Is it because she can't? Or she won't? We'll be looking at feelings generated by situations—such as steps a student would take if a kid is being bullied on the playground. We'll offer multiple possible responses that measure social-emotional competence and provide a profile of students' strengths and weaknesses.

Each assessment will be 20-35 minutes long. We anticipate them being given three times a year. They'll be online and computer-based, though we're open to paper and pencil for the pilot.

How will the information be used?
Kettler: Teachers will be able to use the information to identify preventive interventions at both the classroom and individual level. Over time, they'll be able to measure changes in students' social and emotional competence and to compare SEL results with academic variables.

What are your next steps?
Kettler: We need to decide on content areas, develop items, conduct an expert review, and then pilot test the assessment.

2. Measuring DREAM Values
Democracy Prep Public Schools

What are DREAM values?
Miguel Rivera Rios: Discipline, respect, enthusiasm, accountability, and maturity. We use a variety of platforms and games to measure students' actions in terms of these values. We use a token economy to closely track and reward what's important.

What are you planning?
Rios: Our proposal aims to illuminate how students are developing and applying a core set of values via text-based games, which have been shown to be powerful tool in relating educational content in an engaging manner. Students will be presented with tailored scenarios that require them to make predetermined decisions. Initially, the game will be targeted at addressing the unique set of DREAM values for high schools at Democracy Prep, but it will be able to accommodate other schools' values and will be adaptable to students of any age.

Scenarios will be crowd-sourced from similarly-aged students so that they reflect real-life scenarios and are as developmentally and culturally appropriate as possible. Students will accumulate points based on decisions they make.

How will the information be used?
Rios: The results can be used in many ways. Individual scenario responses can provide insight into a student's personal values and priorities. Students can use the results to reflect on their actions and set goals. Grade-level or student subgroup scores can be used to set town hall themes or broader initiatives. Multiple administrations throughout the year and across years can provide insights into changes in character alignment among groups of students.

What are your next steps?
Rios: We'll use the first half of this school year to work with students to build out the scenarios. We'll be enlisting alumni as well as current students.

3. VESIP™: Virtual Environment for Social Information Processing
Rush University Medical Center

What are you planning?
Ashley Karls: We want to look at how students solve social problems in grades 3 through 7. We'll be using gaming to develop challenging scenarios to see how students respond to various situations: ambiguous provocation, bullying, initiating an individual friendship, and entering a group.

To make it more engaging, kids will personalize avatars and select scenes depicting real-life issues that happen everywhere from cafeterias to hallways. The questions

will be looking at the student's preferred solution, how she identifies the problem, goal preference, emotional response, degree of hostile intent, and degree of self-efficacy. Peer characters will ask questions as part of the story.

Each assessment will be 30 minutes long, with 10 scenes. Students will take a break after the first five and change their avatar outfits.

How will the information be used?
Karls: The assessments will be web-based, self-directed, and brief (30 minutes). Automated scoring will provide data that can be used at the student, classroom, school, and district levels.

For more information

About the webinar
PowerPoint: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Design-Challenge-Webinar-Master-rev-2018.pptx

Recording: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018-08-23-10.01-Winners-Showcase_-2nd-SEL-Assessment-Design-Challenge.mp4

About the Assessment Work Group
http://measuringsel.casel.org/

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