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The Authentic Making (and Assessing) of Successful Teacher Candidates

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METHODS

The Authentic Making (and Assessing) of Successful Teacher Candidates

KRISTIN SOVIS AND AMANDA STEARNS-PFEIFFER

In this era of standards-driven assessment, it is easy to see why novice teachers sometimes opt for the ready-made lesson plan, the district-sponsored unit plan, and teaching activities that teach to the high-stakes test. However, these practices, as decades of research suggest, do not inspire authentic learning and can actually deter and de-motivate students. In her August 2015 column, “We’re Judging Teachers with Inaccurate Measurements,” Elaine Hampton notes that standardized state testing “is excessive, punitive, and poorly designed.” Also startling is that this one-size-fits-all teaching approach is gutting our profession of bright, creative, and smart teachers, as Nancie Atwell suggested in her March 20th, 2015 interview with *The Huffington Post* after winning the noteworthy Global Teacher Prize.

How, then, can we prepare our teaching candidates to engage their future students in authentic and inspired learning? The answer is straightforward: by involving our teaching candidates in authentic learning that inspires and engages them. What, though, does this look like in our methods classrooms? As English educators, we are working to inspire our K-12 teacher candidates in thoughtful decision-making as teachers, and foundational to this is equipping them to be informed teachers who practice regularly in critical self-reflection and self-assessment. By engaging teacher candidates in peer- and self-assessment activities, and framing our courses with a self-reflective pedagogy, we are working to develop a self-assessing mindset in our teacher candidates that they can continue to develop as classroom teachers.

Furthermore, we propose that this mindset will help illuminate how the theory studied in methods courses provides the foundation for curricular decision-making in the field; these learned skills help ensure our teacher candidates are effective in the diverse contexts in which they will teach. In this piece, we articulate our rationale for re-envisioning authentic assessment in teacher education programs, present frameworks for implementing authentic assessments, and

share teaching strategies and activities that illustrate this approach.

Kristin Examines Expert Teacher Educators’ Development of ‘Stance-Takers’

As discovered in my dissertation research (2014), one common and defining characteristic among expert teacher educators’ methods courses is their aim to develop teacher candidates into “stance-takers.” “Stance-takers” are teacher candidates and practitioners who ‘develop informed stances on issues in teaching writing and in English education’ (Sovis, 2014, p. 144). Inherent in developing ‘stance-takers’ is that teacher candidates and practitioners engage in critical self-assessment. In the following sections, I first provide snapshots of how the expert teacher educators incorporate self-assessment into their methods courses in efforts to develop ‘stance-takers.’ I then explain how I involve my methods students in critical self-assessment through the very same framework that helped my dissertation participants to reflect critically on their methods courses. Thus, I argue that teacher candidates and practicing—even expert—teachers can use this framework to reflect critically on and assess *what* they do in the classroom and *why* as they work to evaluate past practice and develop future practice.

Before delving into the teacher educators’ approaches to developing teacher candidates into self-assessing “stance-takers,” I will acquaint the reader with both my study and the participants. Through in-depth case studies, my dissertation illustrates not only *what* is happening in writing methods courses but *why* in its examination of these courses and instructor influences. In addition to presenting detailed ‘course portraits’ of expert writing teacher educators, one major outcome of this study is a framework for exploring, understanding, and reflecting upon teacher influences as related to practice. This framework is applied to the participants of this study and identifies three strands that contribute to instructors’ teaching experiences:

1) professional journey, 2) teaching context, and 3) theoretical frames. This framework, extending research into concepts of “pedagogical content knowledge” as defined by Pamela Grossman (1990) and “theoretical frameworks” as defined by John Dewey (1916), is a tool for inquiring, understanding, and reflecting on the teaching practice of not only writing methods instructors, but also of teachers of all disciplines and at all levels.

I used this framework to explore the work of three expert writing teacher educators who graciously offered their time, expertise, experiences, and course documents to my dissertation study. These are educators who are committed to their profession on both a micro- and macro-level, as they are all active participants and leaders within their individual institutions, departments, and programs and in professional communities such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), NCTE state affiliates, the National Writing Project (NWP), and the Conference on English Education (CEE). These three individuals have also built their careers around developing students as teachers.

Kelly is an associate professor of English at a regional teaching institution in the rural Midwest. She teaches and supervises pre-service elementary and secondary English education undergraduate students. Kelly teaches the equivalent of a 4/4 load with release for intern teaching supervision; her position is housed in the English Department.

David is an associate professor of English at a regional Master’s-level comprehensive institution in the suburban/urban Midwest. He primarily teaches pre-service secondary English education undergraduate students, along with the occasional graduate student. David teaches a 3/3 load and maintains a leadership position in a NWP site; his position is housed in the English Department.

Jessica is an assistant professor of English at a research-intensive, doctoral-granting institution in the urban East. She teaches and supervises pre-service and in-service English education graduate students. Jessica teaches a research load, typically one or two courses per semester with a heavy research and advising load; her position is housed in the Division of Curriculum and Teaching.

Interestingly, these three teacher educators—though teaching in very diverse contexts, from diverse professional and personal backgrounds, and operating from varied pedagogical frameworks—all engaged students in theoretical readings and critical issues in English education. Furthermore,

these readings and issues were infused into course assignments and self-assessing activities throughout the semester. In essence, teacher candidates’—and in Jessica’s case, some practicing teachers’—introduction to both theory and issues is the foundation from which teacher candidates develop their own critical and informed stances as teachers. In developing stance-takers, these teacher educators see their courses “as vehicles to acquaint and immerse [teacher candidates] in concerns and issues in the teaching of writing” and their “syllabi, assignments, and reflections reveal this” (Sovis, 2014, p.144).

Teacher educators’ syllabi set the tone for the self-assessing and stance-taking

consciousness that the courses aim to develop. Kelly’s syllabus begins, in fact, with a listing of sixteen issues related to the teaching of writing that may be discussed in her course. And Jessica begins her “course overview” with three “essential questions” that hail students to take a stance: “1) What is writing and what do writers do? 2) Who am I as a writer? As a teacher of writing? 3) What works in writing instruction?” David’s opening statement under the same heading in his syllabus states that his course is “designed to provide you with opportunities” to “develop philosophies.”

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The course assignments also respond to teacher educators' aims to professionalize their students into critical stance-takers, and self-assessment is essential to successfully completing these assignments. All three courses require that students write a reflection on their growth in a process essay or reflective piece, a component of the writing portfolios assigned in each course. While the focus of this reflective component is the student as a writer, it also often becomes a forum for students to articulate how their own writing process and reflections on the writing process shape their beliefs about or approaches to writing and teaching writing. Jessica's students also write a "philosophy statement" early in the semester, which they revise throughout the semester. This is certainly a professional piece, one often required in teachers' application materials and professional files, that Jessica engages students in crafting; moreover, the assignment is one that requires teachers to reflect on the course and their experiences in articulating and explaining their stances.

Teacher educators' reflections on their courses certainly speak to the different teaching contexts they operate within, which in turn affect their methods and expectations in regard to their students becoming stance-takers. Jessica's students are graduate in-service teachers, either completing their intern teaching or lead teaching in classrooms; it is more developmentally appropriate that Jessica's students develop a philosophy than David's or Kelly's, as David's or Kelly's writing methods course is often students' very first writing methods course, and many of their undergraduates have more limited, if any, actual teaching experience than Jessica's teachers, who are in the field while taking her course.

Jessica is working to develop her students' "instructional consciousness" through the course, and her students have an actual context in which they are teachers to work on developing this. As they reflect on classroom experience, Jessica and her students return to the three essential questions (mentioned above) when developing their actual philosophy statements and professional stances concerning issues in the teaching of writing.

In contrast to Jessica's students, Kelly's and David's student are undergraduates, and in Kelly's case, some are elementary education majors and others secondary English education majors. Kelly's students have a wide range of experiences, and given her institution's rural, wilderness location, her students begin their teaching careers in various locations, as teaching jobs are in high demand in Kelly's area. Kelly's goal is to prepare them for navigating a variety of teaching contexts in their future

careers. Kelly wants her students to "think like teachers" and in doing so, rationalize their choices as teachers of writing in completing the course assignments.

The same is true for David, though his student population is largely secondary English education majors and minors. An assignment in David's class is to attend a professional event and write a response to the event; David, like Kelly, encourages his pre-service teachers to become acquainted with professional organizations and activities that are important to the teaching of writing. David feels strongly that it is his responsibility to engage students in discussions of institutional realities in scaffolding students' thinking about professional issues in the teaching of writing. David wants students to "develop a better awareness of their own theoretical framing" and models and scaffolds this for them as he engages them in ethnographic ways of thinking and doing throughout the course. David reflects that his students are "going to need to have a framework" in their profession "even if no one asks them about it," and one of his primary aims is to equip students with this framework by the end of the course. Of course, this requires students to become stance-takers.

Methods Students as Stance-Takers: A Framework for Critical Self-assessment

In learning about Kelly, David, and Jessica and their courses, I focused on unpacking their 1) personal and professional journeys, 2) teaching contexts, and 3) theoretical frames that influenced their work. These three strands constitute the framework that I propose engages teacher candidates, novice teachers, and teaching experts, alike, in critical reflection and assessment of their teaching practice. One might ask, how can a framework used to unpack and better understand expert teacher educators' experiences and influences be applied to the undergraduate methods student experience? In my experience, undergraduate teacher candidates have ample and rich experience to reflect upon and assess; they each have unique professional journeys, they each have experienced diverse teaching contexts (as both student and teacher), and they each are affected by theoretical frames—even if they are unfamiliar with such terminology coming into our courses—that influence their professional identities. Why not invite our prospective teachers to the teachers' table and provide them the tools and situations in which to think and act like the expert teacher educators above? As Linda Sue Stewart points out in the January 2015 issue of *English Education*, teacher candidates "begin to imagine

themselves as teaching professionals,” which is an “uneasy, yet exhilarating shift” (p. 168).

The three-strand framework developed and utilized in my dissertation research supports prospective teachers in making this shift and is the framework that I explicitly infuse into my undergraduate writing methods course. This framework engages undergraduate teacher candidates in critical self-reflection and assessment practices that support understandings of their budding professional identities—who they are as teachers and why—and serves as a platform for discussing the teachers they want to be and why. This self-aware and self-assessing mindset is one that, I propose, will support teacher candidates’ work as classroom teachers across diverse contexts.

The framework provides our classroom community with a working and common vocabulary for individual teacher candidates’ self-reflection and self-assessment, as well as for the pedagogical discussions in our classroom. As Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2012) assert, establishing and engaging a community of learners in a common vocabulary enriches the effectiveness of a community. And, if our goal as teacher educators is to invite prospective teachers into our professional community, why belabor engaging them in authentic pedagogical discussions? Why not engage prospective teachers in discussing how the interplay between their personal and professional experiences, their teaching contexts, and their developing theoretical frames influence what they teach and how they teach? Such metacognitive reflection and self-assessment are, after all, the habits of mind we strive to exercise.

In doing and reflecting on coursework, my methods students think, write, and speak with the framework in mind. My prospective teachers, for instance, are prompted to write professional emails and memos, professional development materials, and unit and lesson plans and rationales—all of which are contextualized in hypothetical or actual teaching scenarios—and all of which are asking students to, in Kelly’s words, “think like teacher[s].” Similar to the philosophy piece that Jessica’s students write and workshop, my methods students write a ‘pedagogy narrative’ in which they describe and reflect upon a significant event(s) in their development as learners and/or teachers and unpack the narrative’s focus in pedagogical terms. This is a piece that my methods students revisit and workshop throughout the semester, refer to for inspiration in drafting professional writings on issues in English education, and eventually highlight in their teaching portfolios. This assignment supports my overarching

instructional aim: that teacher candidates engage in critical self-assessment practices situated in authentic professional situations, and that these habits of mind carry over into their work as classroom teachers. Like David, I want my prospective teachers to be confident in articulating to teaching colleagues, administrators, students, parents—and most importantly, themselves—why they do what they do in the classroom. This, of course, is only possible through critical and ongoing self-reflection and self-assessment.

The “pedagogy narrative” assignment sets the tone for a semester of critical self-reflection and self-assessment in which prospective teachers develop stance-taking habits of mind; it also engages undergraduate methods students in the very same framework I developed to support my understandings of expert teacher educators’ work in the methods classroom. I suggest that this framework supports prospective teachers in developing self-reflective and self-assessing habits of mind needed to be ‘stance-takers’ in our profession. And stance-takers—in pushing back against the standardized, high-stakes, one-size-fits-all assessment practices that plague our education system—are exactly what our profession needs the most.

A Second Mode for Authentic Assessment: Amanda Explores the What, Why, and Where

As important as it is for preservice teachers to articulate *what* they do and *why* they do it, current trends in teacher evaluation often now include recorded classroom teaching and explanation/analysis of where the purported teaching (and learning) occurred. Both models of assessing teacher candidates (looking at the why and where) are important as we prepare them to enter the classroom and into an environment where justification of pedagogy and effective practice are equally vital and reliant upon one another. Accordingly, these evaluation mainstays are pushing teacher educators to look more specifically at the teaching practices of our teacher candidates.

The teacher education program at my university requires that teacher candidates learn to make claims about their teaching and that they provide evidence to support those claims. In other words, take this intern teacher’s reflection as an example:

“My 10th grade history class had a 30-minute discussion about the meaning and interpretation of three different paintings from the Harlem Renaissance. Their responses were highly intellectual and each student was able to build off of, agree with,

or disagree with another student's response. It was amazing; I just sat there in awe of my own students. To be honest, I did nothing. I think that's why it was such a great discussion. I simply taught about the Harlem Renaissance, modeled how to interpret a painting, and provided the paintings for them to look at."

This teacher candidate says she "did nothing," yet she is actually illustrating an understanding of the need to provide space (by letting go of complete control) for student autonomy and voice in a classroom discussion—a skill that often does not come for years in a teaching career. Being able to recognize this in her teaching, and what accounted for the "highly intellectual" responses, is important in justifying classroom practices. However, asking teacher candidates to record themselves and point to the "highly intellectual" responses and to the teaching moves they made (and "doing nothing" is, in fact, a teaching move) adds a layer of complexity to their self-assessment.

Where Theory and Practice Meet

In a recent semester of an English teaching methods course, I wanted to look deeper into the abilities of my teacher candidates' teaching practices. Routinely, I assign and assess preservice teachers on a number of written assignments, including a teaching unit project. I know I am not alone in this, as Smagorinsky and Whiting (1995) have documented. However, relying solely on theory-based pedagogy in methods classes does not give us a clear picture of how our novice teachers will perform in the classroom. One local effort to refocus Michigan teacher educators on centering practice in the preparation of teacher candidates is led by Deborah Ball at TeachingWorks (University of Michigan) and is gaining momentum. TeachingWorks emphasizes the development and improvement of novice teachers through increased attention to teaching as a set of learnable skills:

Although tens of thousands of new teachers enter classrooms each fall, our country has never committed to a professional standard for entry-level practice. Assuming that good teachers learn on the job and that ineffective ones can be weeded out later, our nation has carelessly left the quality of teaching—and hence, students' learning—to chance. Teachers' preparation does not typically center on the core tasks necessary for good teaching such as leading a class discussion, interacting with families,

and assessing students' progress. Instead, too often teachers' training focuses on learning about teaching, not on learning to teach.

TeachingWorks is now collaborating with six universities in Michigan with the goal of improving novice teacher effectiveness. As explained above, their mission is to establish standards of practice; these practices are based on nineteen "High Leverage Teaching Practices" (HLTPs) they have identified over the past eleven years. In my own work with teacher candidates, I have found the HLTPs useful in isolating specific practices for observation purposes; rather than focus an observation of an intern teacher on all aspects of teaching (a common occurrence that can be especially overwhelming for a novice teacher), HLTP language allows interns and those assessing them to streamline the feedback given. Furthermore, it allows for a more focused self-reflection of one's own teaching.

As Kristin previously argued, strengthening the reflective capabilities of preservice teachers is vital to their growth as educators in ever-changing classroom environments, especially in terms of justifying their pedagogical decisions. However, articulating the theoretical foundations that underlie practice is only the first step in preparing for a career teaching English (or any discipline, for that matter); assessing whether teacher candidates are prepared for the classroom should include attention to both theory and practice. In the following sections, I will address two ways I have incorporated peer-review of teaching practice as a means of assessment in my methods courses.

Peer Reviewing Practice

The practice of peer review has had a place in the writing classroom now for decades. Peer review, though, seems to be reserved only for the writing classroom. But this model of feedback can serve a tangible purpose with our teacher candidates as well. Moving toward a model of teacher preparation that includes a focus on assessing whether a future teacher can engage in teaching practices means that our methods classrooms need to include more than discussions of pedagogy. Our methods classrooms should also include space for analyzing teaching practice and practicing practice, a stance recently argued by Linda Sue Stewart in "A Catalyst for Change: Staging Dramatics for Preservice English Teachers through Improv, Role-Play, and Collaborative Reflection" (2015). In other words, how can we tell if our teacher candidates are going to be able to "make content explicit" (HLTP

#1) if we never actually see our preservice teachers engaging with their students? While logistically it might be impossible (or nearly so) to observe all of the preservice teachers in a methods class while they teach, it is possible to require them to record themselves and use those recordings in class in a peer- or self-review workshop.

Peer Review in the Methods Classroom

The HLTPs I recently focused on for two peer review workshops included: #1: “Making content explicit through explanation, modeling, representations, and examples,” and #12: “Appraising, choosing, and modifying tasks and texts for a specific learning goal.” The following outlines the directions I give my methods students. (This is the exact wording my students see for peer assessing HLTP #1 and #12; therefore, the difficulties with technology, and the potential logistical problems with capturing video/audio from the field for use in the classroom are visible here.)

In your group, please do the following:

Part I: If someone in the group successfully uploaded his/her audio/video file to the Google Drive, please show your group members how you did so (if anyone in the group needs assistance with this; if not, skip this step and move on to II). If no one in your group can figure it out, please email me the files that you need to turn in.

Part II (HLTP #1): Peer assess your group members’ five-minute segment of teaching. There should be no discussion of your teaching before the video is viewed. Remember, you are investigating the way(s) group members made content explicit through explanation, modeling, representation, and/or examples. Here are some questions to consider (jot down your thoughts for each group member while his/her video is shown; questions and space provided on the back):

- What did you learn from watching this segment? Was this knowledge scaffolded to the students’ prior/background knowledge? If so, how? If not, how could it have been?
- Which method of making content explicit (explaining, modeling, representing, and/or providing an example) did your group member employ. What seemed to go well or “work” in this lesson (perhaps because of the chosen pedagogical technique), or what needed further work (provide evidence for either one)?
- Write one or two questions you have about this lesson.

- Finally, compare your reflection on the lesson versus how the teacher reflected upon this segment for the WIT reflection. Write one interesting comparison.

Part III (HLTP #12):

Peer assess your group members’ five-minute segment of teaching. There should be no discussion of your teaching before the video is viewed. Remember, you are investigating the way(s) group members enacted a task/text in order to target a specific learning goal. Here are some questions to consider (jot down your thoughts for each group member while his/her video is shown; questions and space provided on the back):

- What learning goal(s) are evident in this segment of teaching? How do you know or what were your clues?
- What seemed to go well or “work” in this lesson? How do you know or what is your evidence? Were there instances of the teacher (your group member) modifying the task(s) on the fly? Was it successful (provide evidence either way)?
- Write one or two questions you have about this lesson.
- Finally, compare your reflection on the lesson versus how the teacher reflected upon this segment. Write one interesting comparison here:

Part IV: Choose one of your group member’s information to share with the group. Try choosing the segment of teaching that inspired the most discussion. Note: this does NOT have to be the example of teaching that was “the best!” The object is to learn from each other’s teaching, and sometimes the best learning happens when we struggle.

Although the HLTPs do narrow the focus of teaching practice considerably, they still offer a lot of information (at times too much) to consider when using them for assessment. For example, the full scope of HLTP #12 is:

Teachers appraise and modify curriculum materials to determine their appropriateness for helping particular students work toward specific learning goals. This involves considering students’ needs and assessing what questions and ideas particular materials will raise and the ways in which they are likely to challenge students. Teachers choose and modify material accordingly, sometimes deciding to use parts of a text or activity and not others, for example, or to combine material from more than one source (teachingworks.org).

Because of the particular broadness of #12, I

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further narrow the scope during early peer review workshops to only consider the ways in which the curriculum materials and questions raised work toward specific learning goals. An important learning goal of this peer review activity, as addressed in the first and fourth bullet points, is to have teacher candidates assess whether what they think they have accomplished in their classroom, or what they set out to accomplish with students, has actually happened. In other words, is the *what* of their teaching (student learning goals) supported by the *where* (what is communicated to students)?

An important feature of the peer review is that the segment of teaching is not discussed prior to providing feedback. I purposely limit my methods students from providing any background or contextual information because I want the feedback given to reflect only what the peers see for themselves; this has been an eye-opening experience for my teacher candidates, especially when what they thought they communicated was actually very different than what the peer reviewers inferred from the segment viewed. This is a potentially powerful experience for teachers at all levels of their careers, but especially so for novice teachers. And as we make more moves toward assessing our teacher candidates' teaching practice, we can use peer review workshops (such as the two outlined above) to look at any of the 19 HLTPs in order to isolate practice.

Who Decides What's Authentic?

As we began writing this article, we focused heavily on the authenticity of the assessments we make on our teacher candidates. But as we wrote, we quickly realized that an assessment is not authentic simply because we, the assessors, say it is. What then makes an assessment of teaching capability authentic? If we follow Smagorinsky's lead in his 2014 *English Education* essay "Authentic Teacher Evaluation," we understand that teachers, or in our case teacher candidates, must be the ones who determine whether the assessment is authentically attempting to improve their teaching. We found Smagorinsky's first criteria the most important to consider: "For a teacher evaluation system to be legitimate, I believe that it must have a related set of qualities: it is valid (it has buy-in from multiple stakeholders' perspectives, especially the teachers for whom it is developed) . . ." (p. 165). This same model applies to teacher candidates; for an assessment to be authentic in their eyes, they need to value its significance in providing feedback that "contributes to the development of better teachers" (p. 166).

With this criteria in mind, we believe the assessment models we have outlined here are authentic for one main reason: they situate the teacher candidates as the arbiters of the teaching narrative. In other words, these assessments do not follow a top-down approach in the ways they provide feedback about teaching. Rather, the teacher candidates are encouraged to learn the important skill of self- and peer-evaluation, and therefore justification, of their pedagogical decisions. The teacher candidates learn alongside their peers and mentors (in this case their methods instructors) about how to critically evaluate their own teaching and become stance-takers through that critical self-assessment. Being equipped with these proficiencies can help safeguard early-career, novice teachers from the ready-made curriculums that are often easily accessible and even championed by some stakeholders in education. Using the critical approaches learned in methods courses lays the foundation for making informed pedagogical decisions, justifying those decisions, and identifying where teaching is effective. Making space for authentically assessing our teaching candidates in the ways described here comes from the need to both prepare our teacher candidates for teaching in assessment-driven environments and to ensure secondary students have well-prepared, effective novice teachers.

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Personal Helicon

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

—Seamus Heaney